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# Between Scenic Designer and Director: The Collaborative Process of Four Productions

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BETWEEN SCENIC DESIGNER AND DIRECTOR: THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS  
OF FOUR PRODUCTIONS

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts at

Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

ELIZABETH R. MULLER

Bachelor of Fine Arts University of Arizona, 2006

RON KELLER

HEAD OF DESIGN, PROFESSOR

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, VA

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## Acknowledgements

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BETWEEN SCENIC DESIGNER AND DIRECTOR:  
THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF FOUR PRODUCTIONS

*Ain't Misbehavin'* based on an idea by Richard Maltby Jr. and Murray Horowitz,  
Music by Thomas "Fats" Waller, Directed by Patti D'Beck, Produced by Theatre  
VCU

*Is He Dead?* by Mark Twain, Adapted by David Ives, Directed by John Moon,  
Produced by Barksdale Theatre

*Dead Man's Cell Phone* by Sarah Ruhl, Directed by Barry Bell, Produced by  
Theatre VCU

*Legacy of Light* by Karen Zacarias, Directed by Bruce Miller, A Co-production of  
Theatre VCU and Barksdale Theatre

By Elizabeth R. Muller

## **Abstract**

### **BETWEEN SCENIC DESIGNER AND DIRECTOR: THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS OF FOUR PRODUCTIONS**

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By ELIZABETH R. MULLER

Major Director: Ron Keller, Head of Design, Professor

This thesis presents the unique designs for four productions: *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Is He Dead?*, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and *Legacy of Light*. *Ain't Misbehavin'* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone* were produced by Theatre VCU in Hodges Theatre. *Is He Dead?* was produced solely by Barksdale Theatre at Willow Lawn, a space owned by Richmond's Theatre IV. *Legacy of Light* was a co-production between Theatre VCU and Barksdale Theatre. This thesis examines the design process of these productions through the lens of the collaborative efforts between each director and me. Presented here are the research images, conversations, situations and their resulting designs represented in my renderings and photographs of the fully realized production. Throughout, I will state my objectives in bettering the quality of interaction with each director and my reflections on the ongoing process of creating a trusting and balanced collaborative process, one that expertly serves the production.



## **Introduction**

The shape of a production reflects the relationship between the designer and a director. This collaborative process is difficult to capture unless one takes part in it first hand, and over the past two years, I have had the opportunity to do just that. My first year of graduate school was spent with paper projects. While these projects strengthened my play analysis, drafting, and model-making skills, often my work time found me either toiling by myself in an office or imagining scenarios in a production process. These scenarios in a setting that would not be realized felt static, the production team a figment of my imagination, and the actors quarter inch figurines. In the following years I found that the interaction between actor and set brought the scenic design to life and immeasurably enriched the production process through a close collaboration between director and designer. The four productions that were realized on stage were invaluable for instilling strategies for collaboration, enriching my relationships with the directors, and enabling the action to unfold on stage.

Each production had a different director, and I had seldom met my director prior to our first scheduled meeting. So, one of the first things I learned was how to get past jitters that were akin to something one might feel before a blind date. Fortunately, the director and I already had a shared interest: telling that particular production's story on stage. My process always included finding the elements in the world of the play that I was passionate about, listening carefully to what the director was passionate about, and finally realizing the potential of those affections through a captivating design for the actors and audience. Unlike the faceless directors I had imagined in my paper projects, these were individuals with very different styles of communicating.

I accommodated my style of communication to fit that of the director for each

production. For instance, Patti D'beck was the first director with whom I worked, and some of the most meaningful communication was a result of kinesthetic participation: dancing in the taped-out space. Our production, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, was my first assignment to be realized on the main stage of Hodges Theatre at Virginia Commonwealth University. Our collaboration also taught me how to be in tune so closely with the character of the production and its director, that their energy was captured by the style of the scenic design. The second assignment I received was *Is He Dead?* with director John Moon. In entering this process, I developed paperwork through tables and charts, forming road maps for the logistics of a production, and as a result I found a collaborator who was willing to work very closely with me to utilize the setting. During the next design process with Barry Bell for *Dead Man's Cell Phone* in Theater VCU's fall season, this strategy was refined as I learned that collaboration cannot be forced; collaborative efforts with the rest of the production team not only fostered cohesive production values, but they also allowed for collaborative efforts with the director to run more smoothly. Finally, I was assigned a second production with Barksdale Theatre entitled, *Legacy of Light*, with the artistic director, Bruce Miller, as the director. Bruce and I refined the art of communicating with each other through concepts and imagery rather than carefully plotted specifics. Each experience sent me away with a renewed awareness of what my voice was in the collaborative process, and more importantly, when and how to use it.

*Ain't Misbehavin'*

“...it needs to have a little class.”

*-Patti D'beck*

**Preparation**

Big band swing has always struck a chord with me, so when I was asked to design Theatre VCU's production of *Ain't Misbehavin'* I was more than happy to listen to the sound recordings of Thomas “Fats” Waller's brilliant music. The best way I can describe my relationship to this music would be to liken it to the study of a wave. When energy is sent through a wave it reaches natural oscillation and it can't help but move. That is how big band swing was for me: my natural oscillation, I heard it and I had to sway. I had been exposed to some of Fats Waller's tunes previously in my undergraduate studies through my involvement in jazz ensemble, voice lessons, and swing dance; these experiences had already distilled in me a profound respect for the Harlem Renaissance and its art, but it wasn't until I took on this project, that I understood why and how the beat of Fats and his times could be visually manifested on stage.

Some added challenges on this show were that it was presented to me late in the spring as the second show of the upcoming fall season, and I had already accepted the job of Scenic Artist for Wolf Trap's Opera Company for the summer. During my paper projects I had had the leisure of meeting with Ron in person as frequently as I liked, and the concept of being separated by a physical distance was a new challenge for me, one I would need to master in order to be successful in future professional productions. In addition, I had just learned that the shop's technical director had left and the position had not yet been filled for the upcoming school year. As the summer wore on with no word of a new T.D., I became more and more aware that I would have to play a double role in the production of this set. Throughout the

process I would learn how to represent my ideas and designs succinctly with the director through whatever means Patti and I communicated.

In preparation for our first meeting I studied the music and its score. *Ain't Misbehavin'* was composed as a musical review. Arranged as tracks on a recording would be, there is no classic plotline. In order for me to familiarize myself with the play, all I could do was listen to the Broadway cast recording. I also spent time reading the libretto. The messages of Fats Waller's music ranged from such sweetly courting songs as "Honeysuckle Rose" to the abrasive mockery of "Your Feet's Too Big". Some were up-tempo, for instance "This Joint is Jumpin'" about a rent party so big that someone called the cops, to sullen somber numbers like, "Black and Blue" where Fats relayed the oppressive state of being judged by the color of his skin rather than the nature of his character. The characters even sang about experiences outside of Harlem, ranging from an American Bandstand, to the Waldorf. This span of messages, moods, and settings, made me wonder how the director expected to see all of these qualities reflected in one space.

### **The First Meeting**

From our first meeting in the spring semester of 2009, the semester prior to the production's build, one of my first observations of Patti D'Beck was that she had a tremendous amount of energy. It seemed to emanate from the tips of her fingers to the bottom of her toes, and when she spoke passionately about the show I simply let her energy wash over me and tried, as best I could, to take concise notes. Beyond the specific topics of which we spoke during that initial meeting, I was beginning to learn that the simple act of taking time to appreciate the director's personality was a key element in determining the qualities the completed production would reflect.

In the last two seasons, Patti had directed *Chicago* and *Cabaret*. The same decking had been recycled from one production to the next, and in both instances the live band had sat on an upper deck, and the majority of the action and dancing had taken place on the large lower deck. Patti's first request was that the set be different from both of these productions. As I had assisted Ron Keller with *Chicago*'s design process and helped build it in the shop, I was extremely familiar with the look and feel of the design to which she was referring. *Chicago* had been a mix of class, with its glossy black floor and metallic city skyline, and hoodlum, with its towering brick walls and prison cell bars. The lower deck was large and rectangular in shape, sitting at 2' 8" higher than the actual deck of the theatre. Having worked on the production so closely, I would have to try to completely erase its shape and design from my mind and start fresh.

Patti went on to outline that she saw the design for this show as reminiscent of the famous Harlem Cotton Club . She also wanted it to have the feel of a rent party, with an underlying intimacy and close contact. She desired that the band and the piano be completely accessible to the actors so they could "gather around" it when they needed to. In a production she'd choreographed previously, they had used a piano that was able to freely move about the stage, which she had enjoyed very much. "The space should also feel comfortable," she explained, recommending that tables surround the stage for audience seating. The other imperative was that there should be plenty of room to dance. "I'm not sure what kind of club we're in," Patti concluded, "but it needs to have a little class."

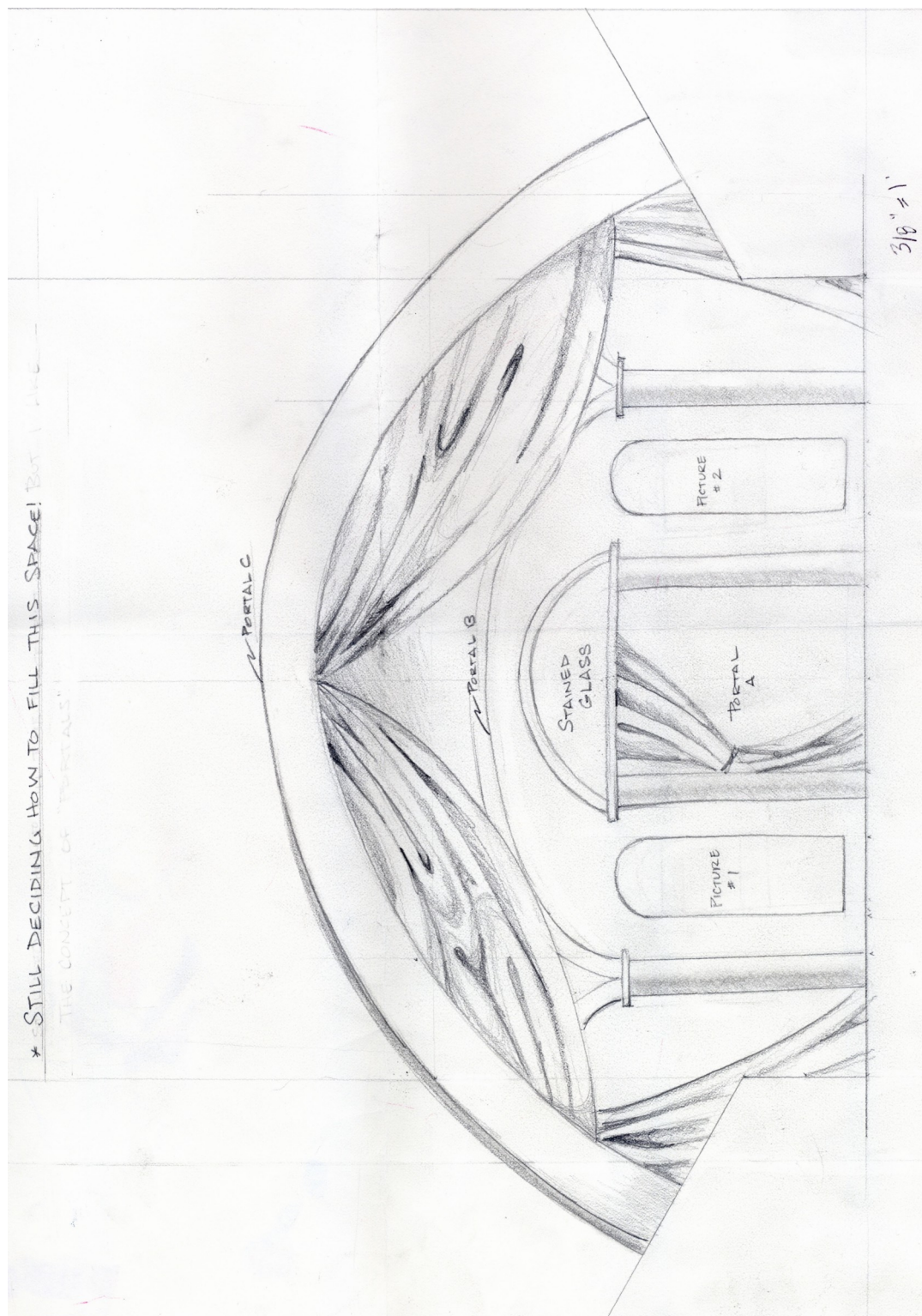
## **Research**

I began my search by looking for images of venues where Fats' music would have been performed. First on my list was the Cotton Club to which Patti had referred. As Ron

recommended, I watched Francis Ford Coppola's 1984 movie "Cotton Club" to see a convincing replica of the space's interior. I was disappointed to find that the space featured certain undesirable qualities. The stage floor was raised so that the performer's feet were at face level for the audience and was gloss black with a pastel façade of buildings behind it. The audience and the performers were separated by a number of barriers: the audience was primarily Caucasian while the performers were African American; there were booths where members could close the curtains so they did not have to watch the performers at all, and there was a barrier of foot-lights as well.

While I recognized the classy appeal that Patti had referred to, I felt that the Cotton Club was more an example of what not to do, rather than what to model the set after. The redeeming offer of this movie was a scene that took place in a small, nameless club, where the stage was only a inches higher than the audience. The atmosphere was as warm as the heavy yellow ochre curtains behind the performers and as comfortable as the worn wooden floors beneath their feet. The very first rendering of the design was my version of this cozy club. Ron rejected the sketch almost immediately, explaining that it was too cliché and would not work well in Hodges. I found it best to turn my attention to previous productions and quickly understood what he meant. While the low arch of the proscenium I had designed suggested intimacy, it was dwarfed by the emptiness around it. Its simple shape had been used before and very little about the curtains and portals communicated that this space represented the interior of a club in Harlem. I had drawn from a vague reminiscence of a short scene in a film rather than the wealth of research I had begun to accrue.

Thus I turned my attention back to my research and to the rent parties that Patti had mentioned. More specifically, I watched footage of Fats Waller playing the piano. While I found little interesting in the sparsely decorated set of a rent party, the most riveting part of the



**Figure 1.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Preliminary Sketch

room I found was Fats and his piano. Upon recognizing that I had found the genuine character for which I had been looking, the true pursuit of this design began to unveil itself to me. The life of the music was not found in the room, but in the art Fats so naturally produced. In order to understand the natural oscillation that made so many sway, I need not look to the large brick buildings of Harlem, but to the people who fueled its Renaissance.

To better understand the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, I studied the poetry and life of Langston Hughes as well as books recounting the time's art and history. It was with the paintings that I connected the most, each one having more insight than the next. In the works of Winold Reisse, I could not find a single ninety degree angle. Archibauld Motley's paintings introduced a breathtaking array of jewel-toned colors and movement and Aaron Douglas' offered somber layers of translucent colors that always suggested the coming of dawn. I yearned to express a quality that all of these artists' shared in their work: the use of line and color to dance in space, capturing the range of qualities in Fats' music.

### **Response and Collaboration**

Patti's also responded well to the art of the time period. So, I moved forward to create a space that reflected that art. The shape of the proscenium would be created by the silhouette of two dancers I had found in my research. The shapes had caught my attention early on because they were so distinctive: a man made of sharp angles, and a woman of sloping curves, who had not appeared together originally, but when joined created a proscenium that felt stylized and unique. The backdrop was inspired by a photograph of broken piano keys that mimicked Winold Reiss' jagged buildings. They also held meaning symbolically, broken keys filled with lights and arranged in a graceful fan.





**Figure 2.** Winold Reisse, *Harlem Nights*



**Figure 3.** Archibald Motley, *Saturday Nights*

**Figure 4. (right)** Aaron Douglas Jr.,  
*Noah's Ark*





**Figure 5.** Richard Bruce Nugent.  
“Drawings for Mulattoes Number 4”



**Figure 6.** Winold Reiss. “Drawing in Two Colors”





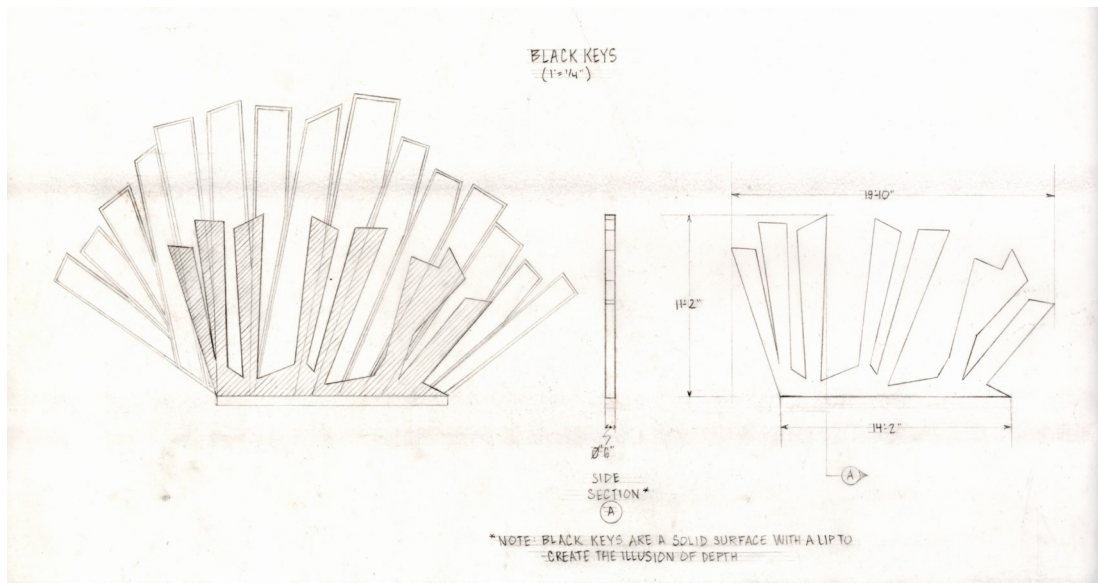
**Figure 7.** Dancing Couple Preliminary Sketch



**Figure 8:** Color Elevation of Dancing Couple Proscenium



**Figure 9.** Anonymous Photographer, *Broken Keys*



**Figure 10.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Piano Keys Design Plate



**Figure 11.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Color Elevation of Keys



I had planned to make the deck mimic the shape of the ledge on which music would sit on an upright piano, but the demands of the show began to shape the space. The department's budget dictated that there would be no live band and a click track would be used in its place. It was important to Patti that the presence of a band was felt on stage, so I began designing a stylized band based on my research. As cut-outs, the band would be brought to life by being backed with a series of light boxes of their own. At first, the band appeared in a close cluster center stage but were later moved to the wing walls so the performers, rather than the band, could be at the heart of their performance.



**Figure 12.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Preliminary Band Sketch

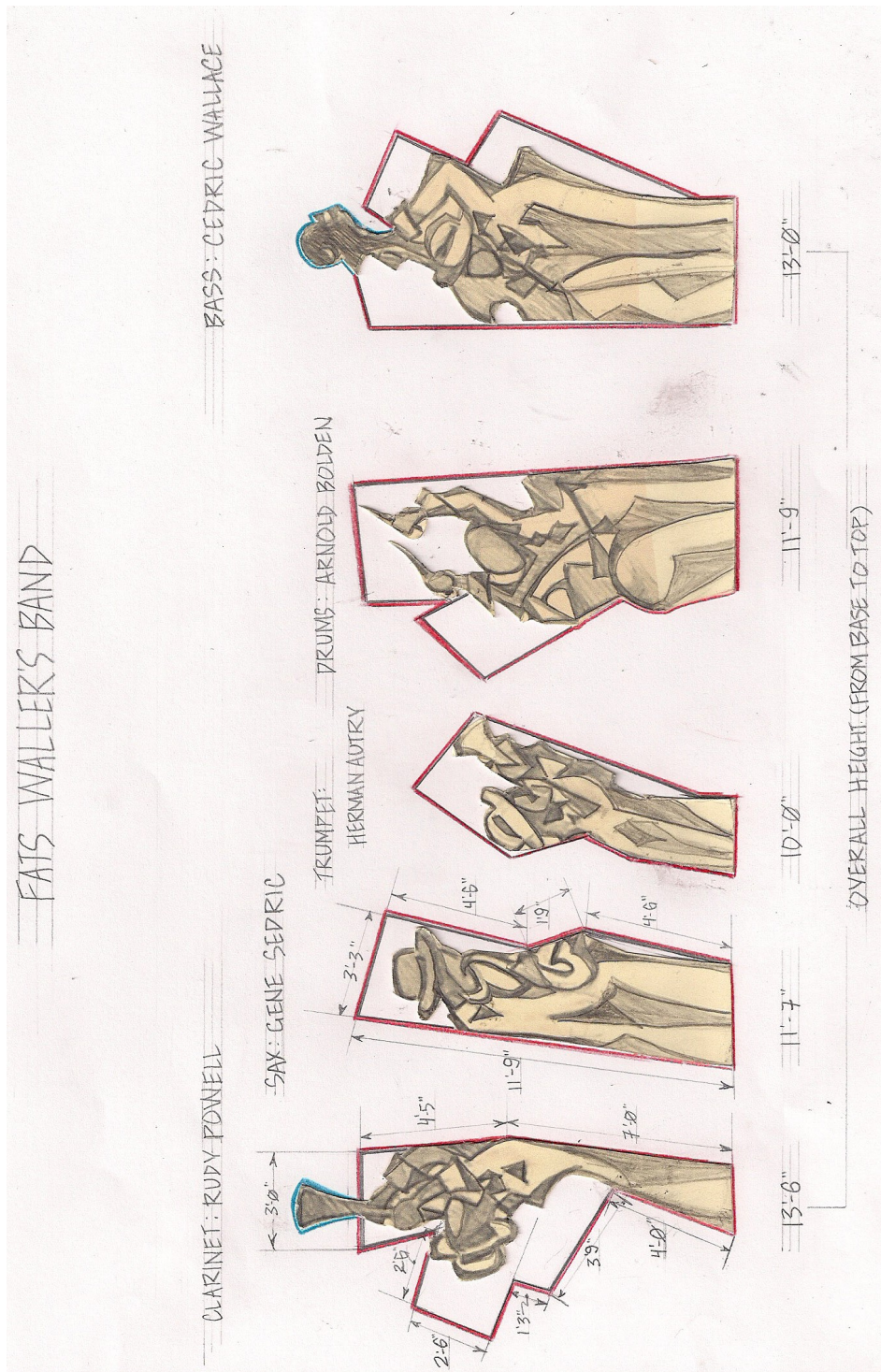
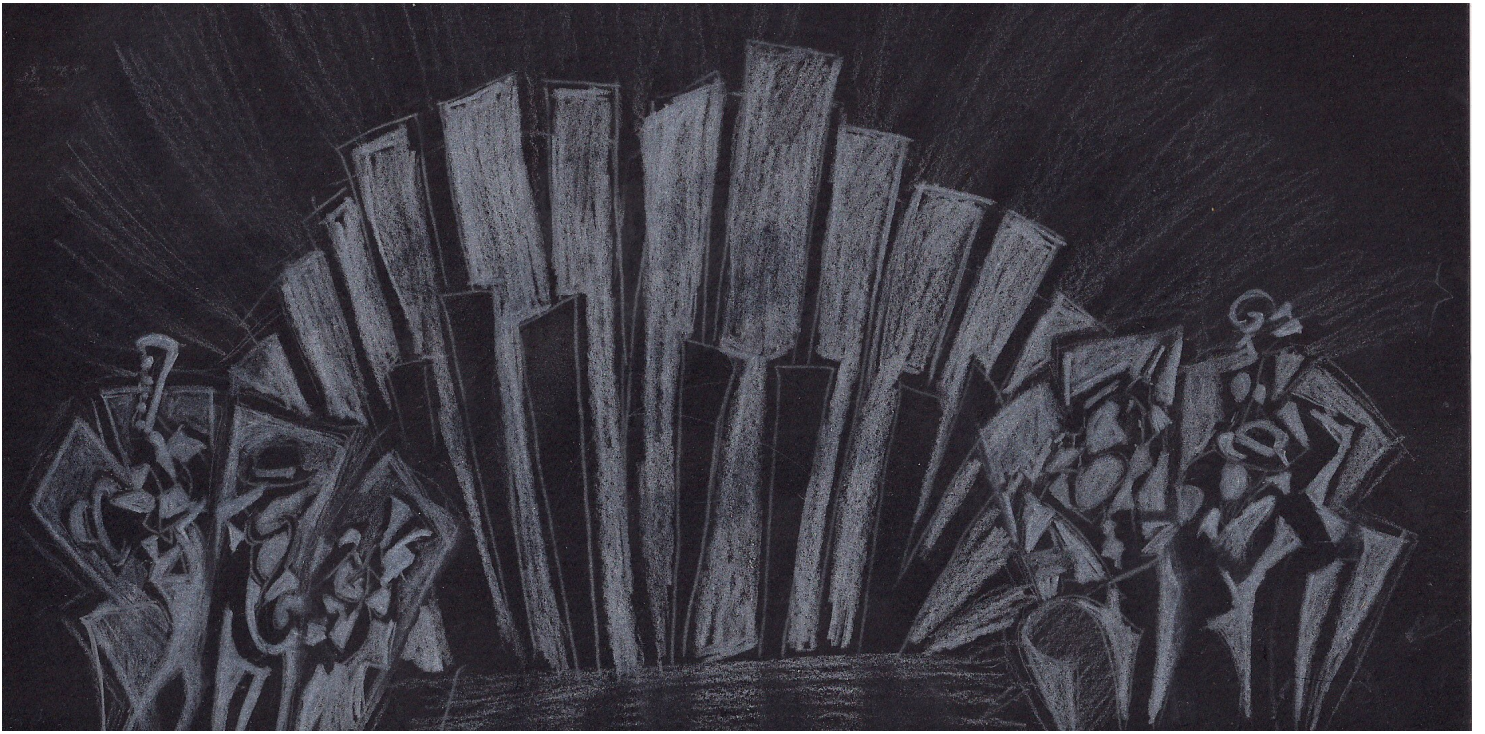


Figure 13. *Ain't Misbehavin'*, First drafting plate of band members

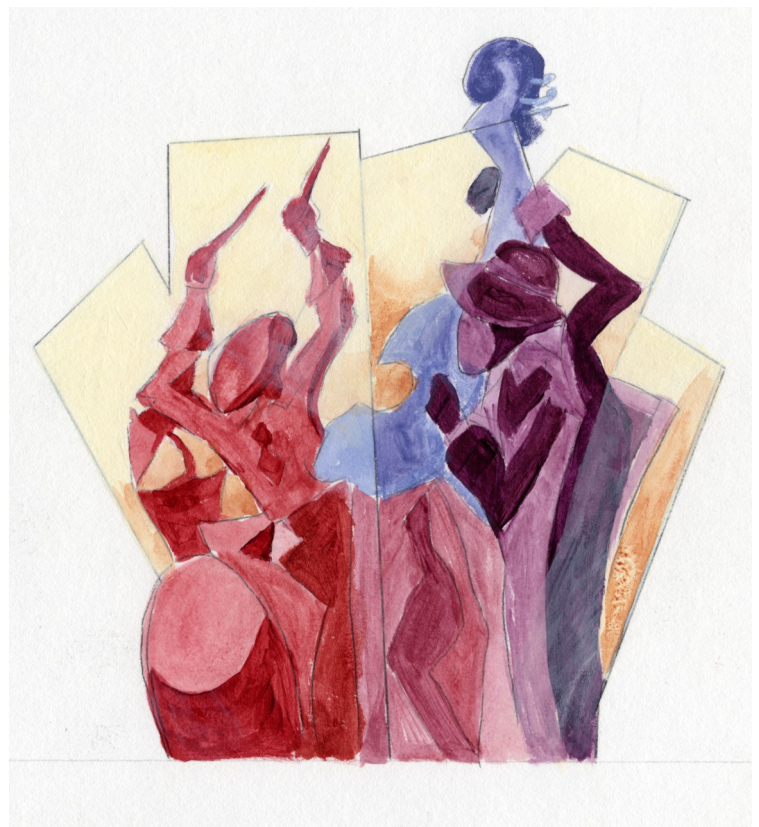




**Figure 14.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Rough Sketch of Band Member Light Box arrangement in relation to the Key Light Box



**Figure 15.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, SR Wind Section Color Elevation



**Figure 16.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, SL Rhythm Section Color Elevation



As the lyrics to the first number in the show stated:

“I don’t stay out late, I don’t care to go.

I’m home about eight, Just me and my radio.”

Patti had also decided that there should be a radio onstage. When I asked if this radio should be brought out for the number and then removed, she responded that it should remain onstage for the entirety of the production. As I began researching radios I noticed that some of the period models looked very much like a music stand. It was then that I decided, since the stage was already beginning to feel full, the 6” stage deck could be shaped like a radio instead of the piano ledge earlier mentioned.



**Figure 17.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Paint Elevation of Show Deck



The design was almost completely solidified and I felt that the elements reflected the notes from my first meeting with Patti; the backdrop would consist of a fan of glowing piano keys, suggesting opulence and class while itching to be the life of a rent party. The dancers, created a faux proscenium to create the feel of a smaller space, flanked by the stylized band, which would also be comprised of light boxes, suggesting the presence of musicians who were present in spirit. Ten to fifteen members of the audience would sit at the fringes of the stage at lamp-lit cafe tables. The floor they sat on would be a checkered dance floor rendered as if through a fish-eye lens to reflect the circular shape of Hodge's thrust. A piano on wheels would roll out onto the eight inch deck, around which the cast could gather to create an even more intimate space.



**Figure 18.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Black and White Rendering

Looking at my final design, Patti was very supportive of the choices I had made, but she felt that Fats Waller was nowhere to be found. “There needs to be the presence of Fats” she explained. It felt as though there was no room for Fats left. After all, his spirit was in the music, the color, and the dancing. Yet, without a representation of his physical presence, the show was not complete. When asked if he would be present for the whole show, Patti responded that unlike the radio, he could come and go on and off stage. In response, I created a self-contained, stylized Fats and piano that would roll on and off stage on a track. He was no more than a lauan cut out, but with some chasing white Christmas lights and a set of wheels, Patti and I could not help but smile as Fats was rolled on to sit center stage at the top, intermission, and finale of the show.



**Figure 19.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, “Fats” Color Rendering

## **Conclusion**

The collaboration with Patti manifested itself in a show “full of jam, jive, and everything”. Her positive and tireless energy was reflected in the ebb and flow of the action of the show, and was complemented by the colorful set that literally glowed from the inside. This is not to say that my design for another director would have been lacking, but simply that I felt the finished product reflected her individual personality rather than a general aesthetic. The gap in distance during my summer job was bridged by visiting Richmond every few weeks for meetings, and supplemented by conversing with both Patti and Ron via phone, internet, and fax, forms of communication I would continue to develop and utilize in future productions. Though, the most useful exchanges still always took place in person.

Since Ron had worked with Patti before, he helped me understand how Patti visualized the layout of the space. He explained that ground plans had little meaning to her; as a choreographer, she needed to see the ground plan mapped out on the floor in full scale. It was through working with Patti that I learned the invaluable activity of leaving the meeting room and visiting the space. This act alone, most succinctly answered more questions than countless conversations over a ground plan. Going into the theatre and pointing out where the deck would stop and the dance floor would begin, allowing Patti to feel where the actors would be in the actual space, helped solve spacing issues before they could happen. Since the shape of the deck was very specific, I made sure that I was present to help the stage managers tape it out in the rehearsal space. However, this method would have been more useful if there had been a way for me to tape out the upstage space as well; as the area became more and more vital to the performance, it was being repeatedly edited. Again, I noted that I would need to revise my hand drafting strategies in the future so less time could be spent in the editing process.

Unforeseeably, it was not the physical distance between the director and me that was the challenge, but the time-consuming production process that distanced us as I became more involved with the build of the show. A complication in my design process was that the build took place without a Technical Director. Ron informed the shop concerning out of what the scenic elements should be made. Kevin McGranahan, our shop foreman, dealt with the problem solving it took to make the elements become a reality. I provided the layout for these elements which, as they so aptly reflected Winold Reiss' art, did not have one ninety degree angle in them. My drafting plates also had to take on the dual purpose of relaying the design of each piece and the materials out of which it was to be made. For example, I became more apt at drawing the layout in relation to 4'x8' sheets of lumber. While this experience helped me appreciate the technical aspect of the production process, I felt more in-tune with the workings of the shop than the rehearsal process.

I was so busy revising drafting plates, that the needs of the actors and the director were not at the forefront of my thought. For instance, the numbers in the show needed to flow seamlessly from one to the next. A solution for this could have been accomplished by having the properties easily accessible to the actors. Had I anticipated their pattern of movement from one scene to the next, I could have planned storage places as a part of the scenic elements. Instead the solution was a shelf placed just upstage of the wing wall with an occasional hand-off of props and furniture from the stagehands back stage. While this was a viable solution, I recognized the necessity to plan ahead for the director's needs earlier in the process.

In the end *Ain't Misbehavin'* reflected all of the qualities that Patti and I had brought to the table. Through further collaboration with the lighting designer the fifteen to twenty foot piano keys were transformed into sky-scrapers and the performers into wealthy Waldorf regulars.

Spotlights and a vintage microphone stand created the feel of the American Band Stand. The use of table-top lamps set the mood for an evening of entertainment, and “Fats” added to the jovial atmosphere of the performers on the brightly checkered dance floor. While I was satisfied with the way the setting reflected the Harlem Renaissance, I yearned for another opportunity to collaborate in a way where the director felt fully supported by the design. I wanted to design with the action of the play so closely in mind that I was solving problems before they happened.

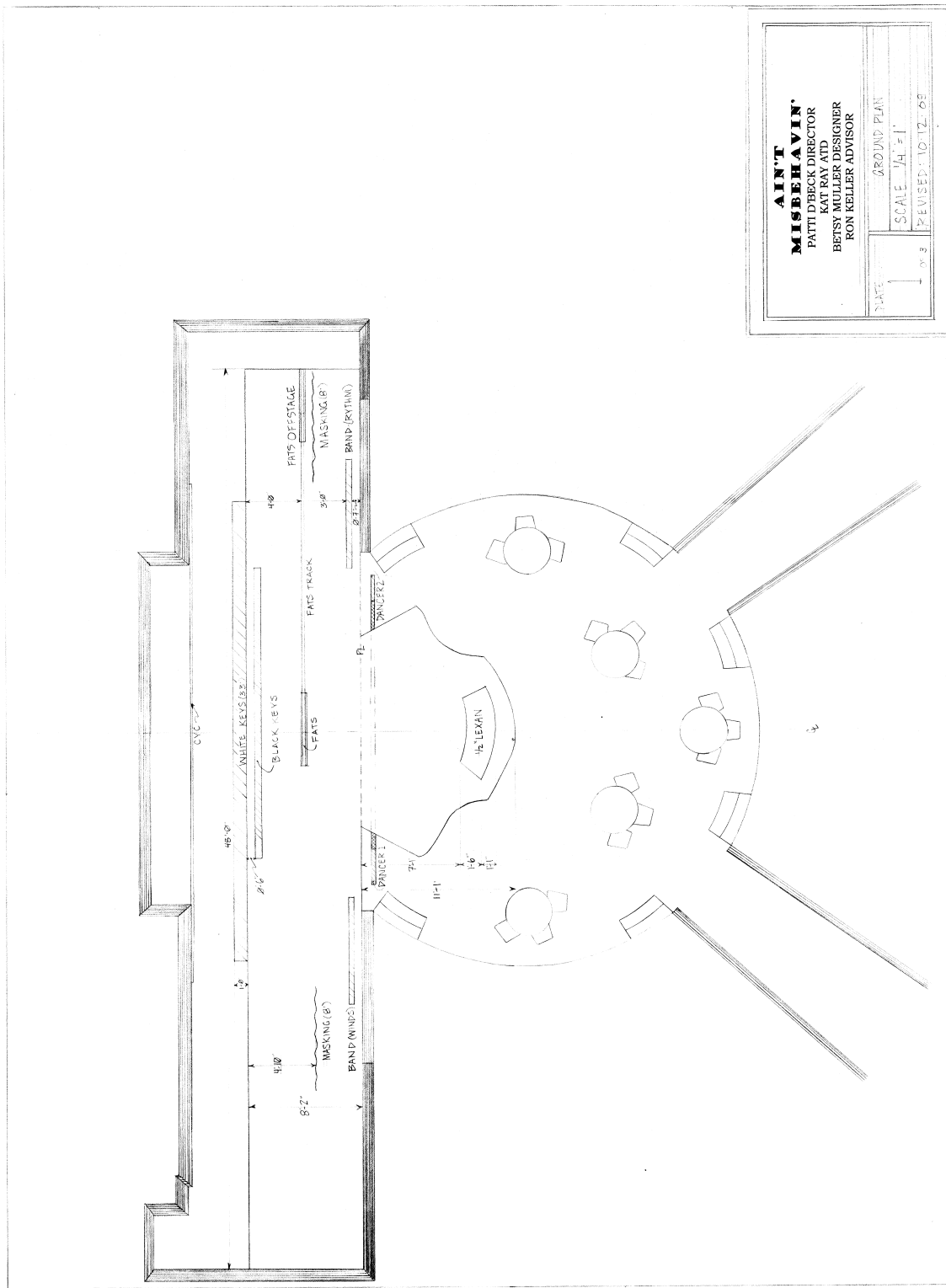


Figure 20. *Ain't Misbehavin'*, Final Ground Plan





**Figure 21.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, The completed set with house lights up.





**Figure 22.** *Ain't Misbehavin'*, The completed set with actors and lighting.



*Is He Dead?:*

“...there need to be walls and doors”

*-John Moon*

## **Objective**

From the beginning of my next production assignment, my personal objective was to think more like a director. Interest in this school of thinking had been encouraged by Ron Keller and ignited by my recent studies of the British scenographer, Ralph Koltai. Koltai prided himself on knowing a play inside and out in order to forge meaningful relationships with directors and allowing for true collaboration on a production. He stated that, a director works with a designer he doesn't mind sitting down and sharing a cup of coffee with. Reading about Koltai's experience instilled in me the desire to literally be on the same page as the director when talking about the script. Excited at the opportunity to be a designer with whom true collaboration was possible, I strove to create organizational tools that would allow me to visually map out the action of the play in order to make quick and easy-to-access reference guides for myself. More importantly, I wanted these guides to be accessible to the director by way of paperwork, email, or whatever means were necessary for us to discuss every thorough detail of the production.

## **Preparation**

*Is He Dead?* was originally written by Mark Twain, and adapted in 2007 for modern audiences by David Ives. In my research prior to the meeting with the director of Barksdale's production, John Moon, I happened upon Mark Twain's original version of the



**Figure 23.** Millet's studio

play which is still in print today, but the segment I found interesting was the “Forward” by Shelly Fisher Fishkin which contained a drawing of the artist Millet’s studio shortly after he had passed in 1875. The article coupled with the drawing, further impressed upon me that while the play was loosely based in reality, it was, in fact, a historical fiction. In other words, the nature of the play gave me artistic license to create an atmosphere that mimicked reality, but was not strictly realistic.

Unlike *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, this production was driven primarily by a dizzying plotline boiling down to this: Millet, a French painter, depicted farmers and fields which garnered no attention from the public. Nearly broke, his fellow painters suggested that Millet pretend to be struck with a fatal disease, while in the meantime he disguise himself as his twin sister “Daisy” to continue selling his work. Having achieved fame and fortune from his feigned death, Millet found discontent in having to lead a double life. At the end of the play he miraculously returned as himself, explaining that he was not, in fact, dead, and true to comedic form, singing and dancing conclude the play. After my first read-through I knew I would need to document this plot line in order to keep track of the order of events in discussions with the director.

Calling on my stage management skills from undergraduate studies, I made a meticulous plot of entrances, actions, and exits suggested by the script. I also had a column for questions for the director concerning stage directions. Through creating this charted plot line, I recognized that although the script was ridiculous at points, it followed fairly simple rules of time and place. The first act took place over a series of weeks; the second took place only over the course of a couple hours. There were two settings: Act I took place in an artist’s studio, and Act II, a Parisian apartment. This rags to riches scene change needed to happen entirely during intermission. My study also unveiled the fact that there were up to 11 characters on

**Table 1. Excerpt from Charted Plot Line**

<b>Script</b>	<b>Characters</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>I:ii</b>	Dutchy, Chicago, O'Shaughnessy	Hanging "Sold" signs		At the top of the scene: - Passage of time - "Sold" signs - 1 more painting covered with a sheet.
31	NA	Indicates Newspaper		Need a surface for Newspapers
32	(Millet offstage)	Knocking	Bedroom Door	
33	+Millet/Widow	Enters		Does he actually throw down his painting supplies?
34	(Widow)	Kicks the couch		
35	(Widow)	Throws himself onto the couch		
36	-Millet	Exits	Bedroom	"slams" the door
37	+Reporter	Enters	From Outside	Announce as he passes window
39	-Reporter	Exits	Outside	
39	(O'Shaughnessy)	Shows Dog Picture	From behind couch?	Props or Scenic?
40	(Widow)	Makes to exit	Bedroom	(S)He is stopped
41	+Thorpe	Enters	Outside	Acknowledges Widow
45	-Thorpe	Exits	"	w/ Angelus, dog, chimney sweep
47	(-)O'Shaughnessy	Starts to exit Exits after line	"	Sees women coming
48	+Bathilde, Caron	Enter	"	Widow behind the door
49	-Chicago, Dutchy	Exit	"	
50	(Widow)	Brings Tea	From?	Place for tea to live (simple country tea) Place for women to sit together to have tea
53	(Widow)	<b>Asides</b>		Two seperate
53	+O'Shaugh.	Enters	Outside	Brings Cigars
53	+Chicago	Enters	"	
54	+Leroux +Marie +Cecile	Enter	"	8 people in room (water bottle humor ensues)
55	(Cecile)	<b>Asides</b>		Continue thru 56, most of her lines are asides
57	+Andre	Enters	"	9

stage at once, which could cause a bit of a traffic issue, especially with the addition of period skirts. With this understanding of the demands of the space created by the plot line, I felt prepared for the first meeting with John Moon.

### **The First Meeting**

John and I did not have this meeting alone with one another as Patti and I had, but under the guidance and direction of Theatre IV's production manager, Ginnie Willard. She began by setting the financial parameters of the show: the budget was \$1500 for the set and \$300 for properties. The rough-hewn lumber that was currently being used in *Grapes of Wrath* was offered to me. She explained that the set for *Is He Dead?* was usually expensive to produce as it was two sets in one. The current 9" deck height allowed me to build set pieces no taller than 9'9" as the lighting designer needed room to hang lights from the low grid. I also needed to be aware of the air ducts and water pipe that hung slightly lower over far stage left. The space had extreme sightlines, which later I discovered, would force any large solid scenery upstage of the wing walls. While these obstacles seemed discouraging to hear first. I was appreciative of the practical tone that Ginnie had used to open the meeting.

With these physical parameters in mind, we began the discussion of the play. John felt that one of the biggest challenges, scenically, was designing two space that were so drastically different. He was also curious as to how we would create replicas of the artist's work and make them appear to be stretched canvas. Since there were so many members in the cast, he asked that there be options for levels upstage. He also outlined which scenic elements were required in each act: Act I required two doors, upstage left and right, and he felt a large window with a French village scene would help establish the setting. Act II required French doors center stage which looked out on the city of Paris and he recommended that the actors use the vomitoriums

that led onstage from the house, as additional entrances and exits.

Next, John outlined the overall effect he saw for each act. Act I would use furniture to make the space feel cozy, while boxes of body parts, empty canvases, crates, and the upstage easel with *Angulus* would create an appearance of messiness of Millet's studio. He clarifies that the studio should not be low, dingy, or oppressive. It was important that the setting have a sense of fun and a sort of "Disney poor". As he went on to explain: while these characters were having a difficult time in life, there was no danger that any character would actually die or starve to death—the audience should never completely lose sight of the fact that this production was a comedy, not a tragedy. He suggested that the overall tone of the first act utilized woods and cool colors. In contrast, Act II would be bright and sumptuous. It would include tables of flowers, a sofa and chairs, as well as a privacy screen. He requested that the coffin be placed upstage on a pair of light chairs. He envisioned the color scheme as comprised of creams and peaches. Where the tone of Act I would be cool, Act II would be warm.

John ended his presentation of thoughts by expressing that he wanted this play to be an opportunity for me to play and try new elements in my scenic design. Encouraged, I asked him,

"Do you see the set as being in a particular style? Abstract? Realism?"

"Realism," he responded, "there need to be solid walls and doors."

As we went in to the theater together, I asked about another possibility,

"How would you feel about paintings mounted behind the audience seating as well, so the audience members feel as though they're in an arts studio?"

To which John responded that it was important to him that the world of the play had clear perimeters. (December 21, 2009).

## **Creating the Concept**

It was evident that I needed to find a way to create a production concept that embraced John's vision of the play with a form that respected historical accuracy, while supporting the playful characters and situations played out on stage. To do this, I studied the main character, Millet, as he was represented in the play in addition to the artist's work. This study enabled me to capture the nuances of the character as I imagined him to express himself on stage as well as ground the character in his native historical context.

Millet's character, in Act I was dour and lusterless. In the opening scene, he defended his artwork by saying, "If my works aren't cheerful, it is never the cheerful side of things that appears to me." (Ives, 15) This outlook certainly supported John's description of Act I as reflecting an artist's studio inhabited by a man who was having a rough time financially but was also full of self pity to the point of ridiculousness. An observation of Millet's paintings also showed that he preferred subjects that were humble workers consisting mostly of farmers. Joining these two studies I decided the setting for Act I could feasibly be a barn that had been converted into an artists' studio. Through my research of artists' studios I planned three areas of the stage for actors to use as places to settle: the couch, the stove, and a still-life collection. In the script, the couch was repeatedly used for repose as well as an object of frustration, as it was sat on and kicked many times throughout the Act, so it followed that it should be as close to the center of the room as possible.

In order to realize John's vision of a "peaches and cream" color pallet for Act II, I further analyzed the play, searching for the inspiration to help me accomplish this transformation. Again, my studies led me back to the main character. Resentful of his disguise as a woman, Millet struggled throughout the first Act with the social graces he must imbue. However, by the

second act he became so overwhelmed by his alter ego of Daisy Tillout, that he wore her character with a graciousness and freedom that he had never formerly expressed as an artist. I also had taken a mental note of the pink dress that John considered a staple of Millet's transformation to Daisy Tillout in Act I. John felt so strongly about the color as an expression of femininity, that I wanted this choice to be reflected in the Parisian apartment. I interpreted that while Millet felt constrained in a woman's costume, the further transformation he experienced as he learned to embrace his role as Daisy led him to surround himself in an atmosphere of flamboyance and freedom, expressed in whimsical pinks, frothy laces, and passionate reds that he chose for the interior of his upscale Parisian Apartment. The placement of the coffin on the initial ground plan was also based on the playful and dizzying emotions of Act II. While I respected John's request to put the coffin on an upper level, I felt the actions should be able to swirl about the coffin—the most evident but best-kept secret in the room, and I made the bold move of placing it directly center stage.

### **Set Dressings**

John's response to my initial research was overall positive and encouraging. He expressed concern toward the image I had presented for Act II. I had chosen the image based on its appearance of elegance as well as its capacity to hide seams in the walls that would be present due to the quick scene change during intermission. Actually, both the large beams of rough-hewn lumber in Act I and the heavy use of fabric for Act II were designed out of the necessity of hiding these needed seams. However, John cautioned me against the weightiness of the fabric in the image. He pointed out that the use of fabric could make the room appear too heavy and dark, and he wanted Act II to have a sense of airiness and whimsy. Returning to my research to find more period interiors that shared these design qualities, I found a way to place





the fabric in panels on the walls and gather lace trim about the doors and mirror. I created a basic ground plan that included the shape of the stage and the spacing of the furniture within the space for Acts I and II. For this spacing, I made sure to ask the costume designer how much space would be needed in order to accommodate the period clothing. The entrances and exits were so important to the comedic timing of the play, that it was very important to provide enough space—that running into the door frame would be the last thing on the actors’ minds. Unlike the elaborately detailed plates I had labored over during *Ain’t Misbehavin’*, my first drafts were simple and drawn on tracing paper, so John would feel free to tell me what he wanted to change before I created the final draft of the set. Having these rudimentary plates in front of John, enabled him to plan blocking and ask for changes in spacing of furniture and the flow of the set. For instance, he was able to foresee the need for more space to cross behind the couch in Act I. Upon seeing the coffin in the center of the room for Act II he reasserted his desire to have the coffin upstage. However, I recognized the usefulness of my in-depth study of the script during a meeting later in the process as we discussed Act II:

“I think I would like a low table in the middle of the room during Act II so the actors can circle around it.”






“Yes, I understand,” I replied, and then added, “My initial intention for placing the coffin in the center of the room was to create this effect.”

He thought about it for a moment and then agreed that this was a plan worth trying. I couldn’t help but beam that day as I left the meeting recognizing that my efforts to think like a director were allowing me to anticipate his needs and truly aiding him in solving problems before they happened.

The early archival and dispersal of information concerning furniture and set dressings was another tool that I began recognizing the value of as the show forged on. In an effort to save money I had begun searching for furniture to pull from three different places: Barksdale's furniture stock which was in storage at The Empire Theatre, Virginia Commonwealth University's storage stock, and the online images of pieces that were in stock at University of Richmond. The latter had the most pieces that matched the time period. The furniture I discovered at U of R included a divan that would serve the sight-line issues of the space marvelously. It sat low enough to the ground that it allowed the viewer to clearly see the actor standing upstage, yet high enough that it was not difficult to get up from in a large skirt. The two arm rests also sat low enough to the ground that the actor seated could also lounge with his/her feet up. The size was large enough to seat two or three comfortably. I began organizing the information from all of the furniture in a spreadsheet and sent it to John.

My intention was to place the divan so it would be accessible for the actors from both the upstage and downstage sides, and would also be ideal for audience sightlines, as it was, by nature, backless. While John said he would consider this piece, he always mentioned it with a furrowed brow and I felt that it might be cut altogether. Again, the act of making a choice far enough in advance for the director to imagine ways to use it, worked well. Late in the production process, University of Richmond announced that they were not lending out any of their furniture as they had designed a show for the season that required the bulk of it. As I had requested the furniture far in advance, spoken with the technical director, and previewed it in person, this announcement was unforeseeable. However, as we began to look at other options, John made a special request that for Act I, it was important that we find a new divan. He had held the image of that specific piece of furniture so closely in mind as he was directing that it had become difficult for him to see the show without it.

**Table 2.** Excerpt of Furniture Spreadsheet

Director: John Moon Props Master: Becky Willard Set Designer: Betsy Muller		Is He Dead? Furniture and Set Dressing 2.28.10		1
Piece	Details	Image	Notes	
<b>Act I</b>				
Low Wicker Stool	#246/ U of R; 10 ½ " x 1'7"			
Crate Stool	#275/ U of R; approx 1'4" x1'4"			
Trunk	#483/ U of R; dimensions?			
Chicken Crate	#175/ U of R; approx 1' cube			
Long White Box	#161/ U of R; 1'-6" x 4'-.25" x 1'-10"			



9a.



9b.



9c

**Figure 25.** Images of the divan (9a.) the cover (9b.) and the distressing of the cover (9c).

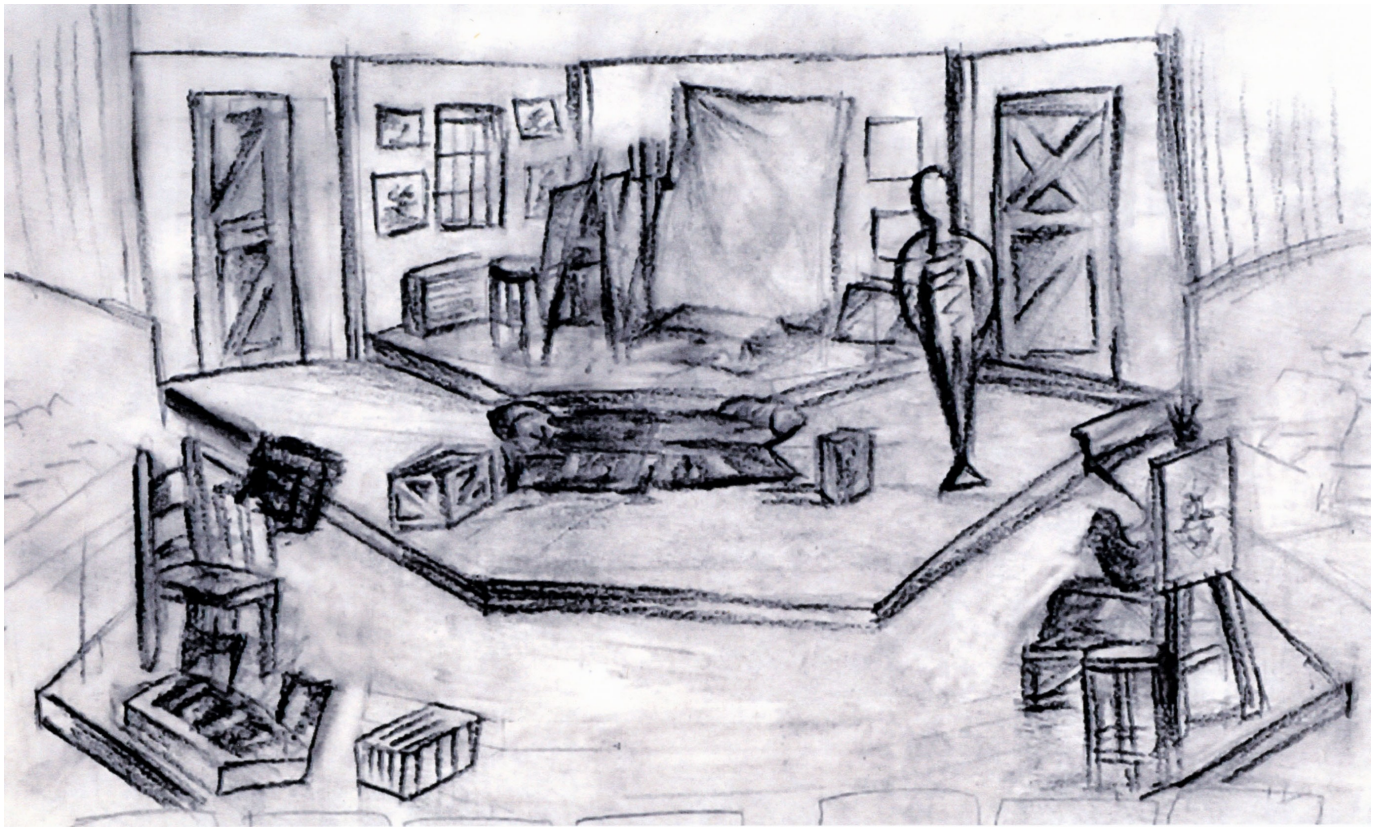
## **A Quick but Meaningful Reprieve**

As I previously mentioned, Becky Arney, the props artisan, conveyed to me University of Richmond's furniture announcement. At this point, my advisor, Ron Keller, recommended that John and I take a trip to a furniture store called Greenfronts. On a Saturday, John and I traversed to Manassas to look at furniture and large floor rugs, since I had hoped to cut the floor treatment down for Act II by using a French Auberge-style rug. We quickly deduced that the floor rugs, even at their close-out sale prices, were out of our budget range. The furniture, while intriguing, and sometimes appropriate for the time period, was also well out of our range.

We may not have taken away any of the furniture, or any of the floor rugs, but I did take away a better understanding of John's personality and sense of humor. The long car ride gave us an opportunity to talk about our worlds beyond the play. While we didn't have coffee, as Koltai had offered as a mile marker of director/designer relationship, we did stop briefly for sandwiches. By the end of the car ride I felt that whatever happened in the following weeks of tech, we were closer to being on the same page than ever. After we returned, we were informed that Becky had spoken further with University of Richmond's technical director, reminding him of which specific furniture pieces we needed, made an exception and let us borrow them.

The relief of the news was not as great as the sense of accomplishment I felt in navigating through the process of enabling the director. The use of quickly created, but usefully organized spreadsheets and ground plans seemed indispensable as a result of this collaboration. The earlier the dissipation of this information, the better, as it left more time for the director to see how well it would serve the purpose of the play. I looked forward to the next production in order to forge a new relationship with the director in which we communicated the logistics of the production more closely and efficiently than ever.





**Figure 26.** *Is He Dead?*, Preliminary Sketch, Act I



**Figure 27.** *Is He Dead?*, Preliminary Sketch, Act II



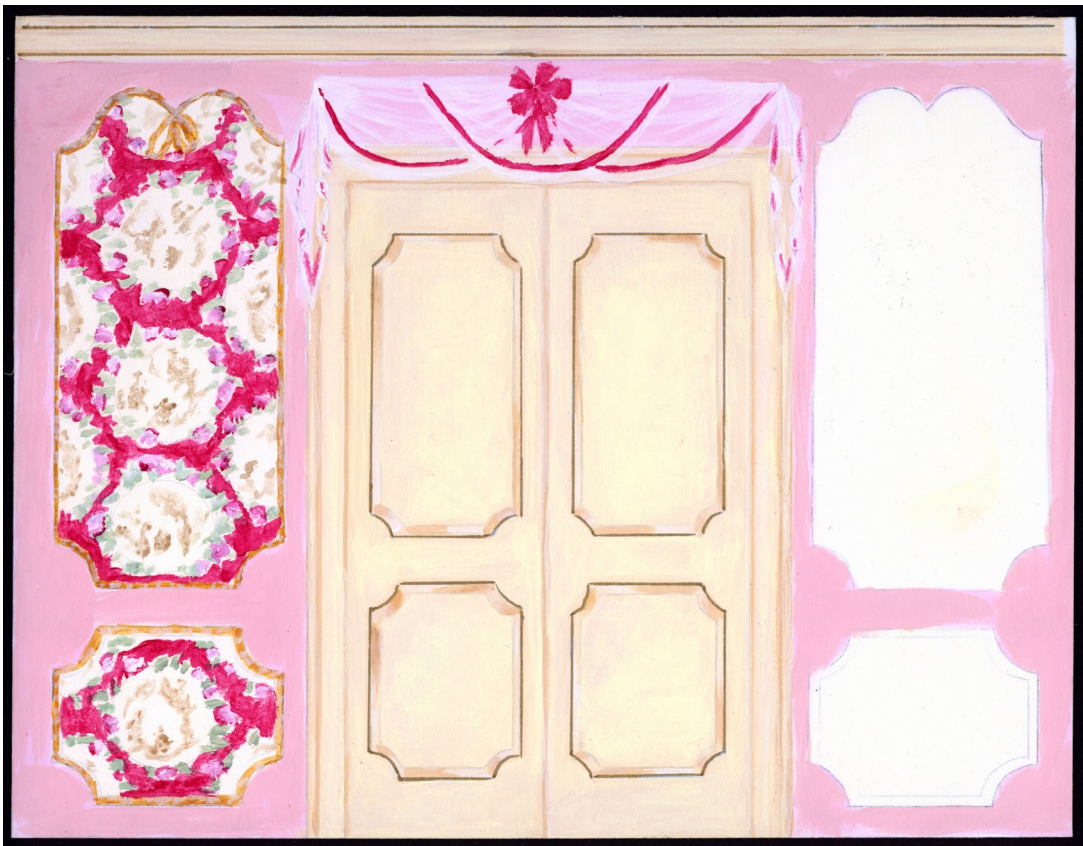


**Figure 28.** *(left) Is He Dead?, Act I Wall Elevation*

**Figure 29.** *(below) Is He Dead?, Act I Floor Elevation*

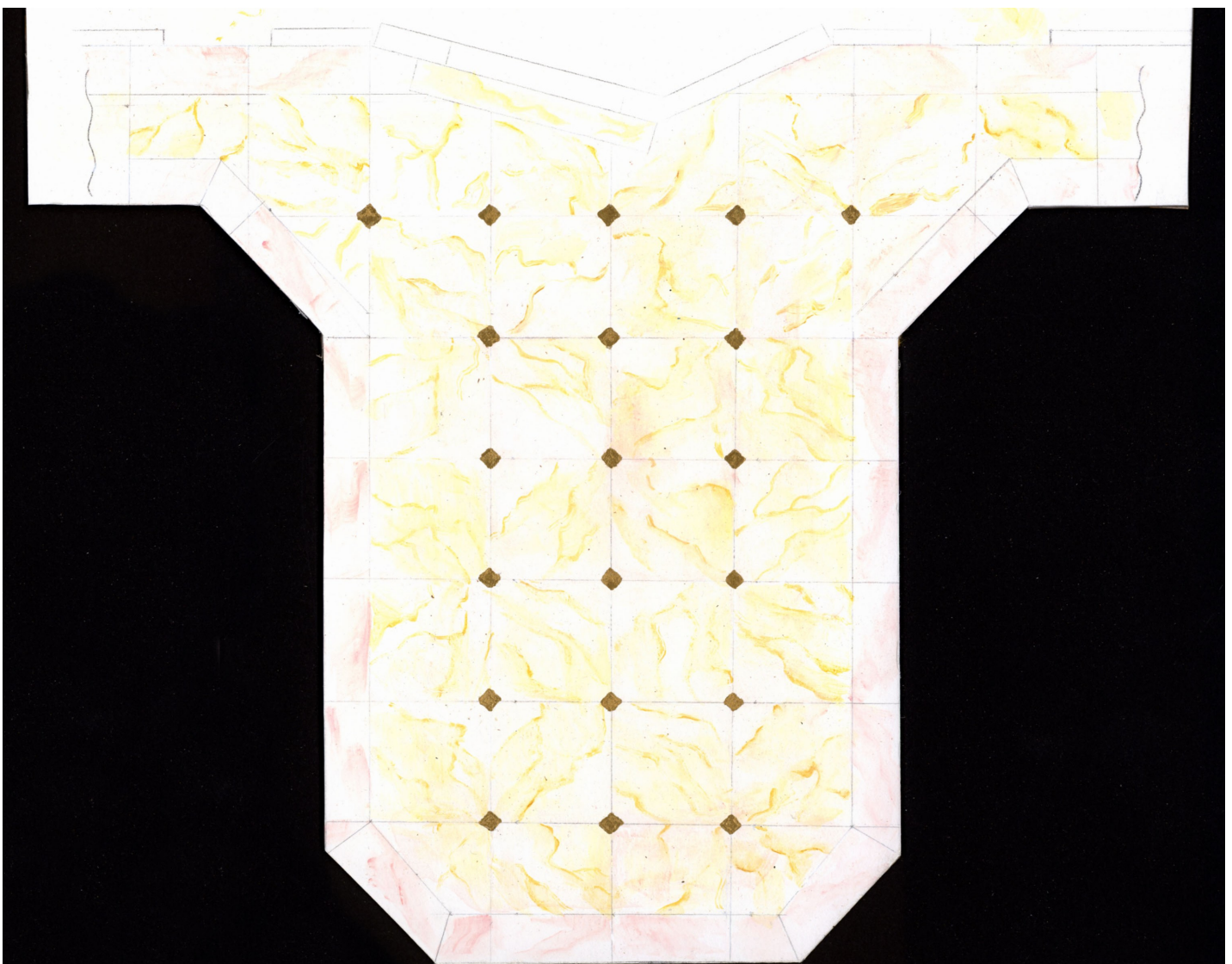






**Figure 30.** (left) *Is He Dead?*, Act II Wall Elevation

**Figure 31.** (below) *Is He Dead?*, Act II Floor Elevation







**Figure 32.** *Is He Dead?*, Photograph of Act I



**Figure 33.** *Is He Dead?*, Photograph of Act II



*Dead Man's Cell Phone*

“Without [*thumping of fists together*] there is no art.”

-Barry Bell

**Objective**

I felt empowered by my experience on the production team of *Is He Dead?*. I was pleased with the graphic organizers I had produced and my ability to foster a positive relationship through frequent emails, phone conversations, and in person conversations with the director. I was eager to see how these skills would serve me in another director/designer collaboration. My objective heading into *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at VCU was to continue these good habits, but in addition, to provide a wider variety of visual responses to the production as early on as possible: sketches, slide shows, and models in order to read the director, Barry Bell's, reactions and take the design in a direction guided by those responses. I had become so empowered, in fact, that I was soon reminded that sometimes it is not what a designer demands of a production, but what the production demands of the designer, that would shape my objectives. Little did I know that some of those objectives would include learning how to take on the role of projections designer and learning how to react to the negative responses just as much, if not more than, the positive ones.

Barry had agreed to direct *Dead Man's Cell Phone* for the first show of the fall season 2010 after having just closed his production of *Tommy* the previous spring. In my first reading, I analyzed Sarah Ruhl's script as being driven by a thoughtful examination of the energy in life and death, and how they relate to the presence of technology in our daily experience. During the spring semester of 2011, I finally asked to speak with Barry, about the process by which he had been assigned the production. He explained that he had watched clips of other productions of

*Dead Man's Cell Phone* and felt that the dramatic timing was so laborious that it had lost its liveliness and any humor had been stifled with stagnant pauses. (Interview April 19, 2011) More than when I had been working on the production, I understood that the artistic choices Barry made were meant to avoid these feelings of stagnation—to help move along a potentially plodding plot line.

The style of Sarah Ruhl's play was in stark contrast to The Who's *Tommy*, which Barry had previously chosen to direct. The musical was mostly action driven, moving along at a fast and powerful clip just as the music did. The production was designed by Tennessee Dixon, the other scenic design graduate student, who's skills set was distinctive because of its background in digital media and projections. Her design featured the presence of a large projection screen mounted above a series of TV monitors that could broadcast the actors from a live camera filming from the front of house. Tennessee's approach to the show was bold, powerful, and had left an impression on Barry and how he saw the collaborative process. Our production process began not long after *Tommy* had had its final performance, and so while I had made it my new objective to work as closely and efficiently with the director as possible, the process also quickly became about learning when it was necessary to create a little space.

## **Projections**

With the knowledge of this previous production, it should not have surprised me that Barry's primary requirement at the first production meeting was the use of rear projections and the use of the large rectangular screen. Also at that meeting he announced that he had already mentioned this design concept to Tennessee. This was one of the first elements that raised my awareness to the fact that this production already felt foreign and alien to me, since before *Is He Dead* I had not used projections in a theatrical setting. This fear of an unfamiliar

medium immediately put me in a defensive mindset. The referral to the previous show's designer who had limited time and means for collaboration for this show was also intimidating to me. I felt that the presence of the rectangular projection screen dominated the shape of the space and I began trying to contrive a way to create a new and unique space that the audience of Hodges had not experienced in the previous production.

I met with Tennessee as soon as possible to try to glean as much information about projections as possible and to discuss to what extent she was able to help before she left on her Fulbright trip to Hungary. As Tennessee had spent ten years teaching a class on digital media, she was more than happy to share the rudimentary vocabulary of planning still and animated media. She showed me the different programs with which she was familiar and recommended that PowerPoint and Isadora were very user-friendly programs for the process. Tennessee even graciously offered her time on the project, if I could give her a specific list of text, items, and the time frame for each of the projections by the middle of July. She also gave me the name of her contact in the kinetic imaging department on campus and recommended that I email or call her if I should need any support.

The unfolding of the use of projections did not follow a calendar that allowed us to further utilize Tennessee's knowledge before she headed overseas. Barry had offered a list of his brainstorming concerning possible projections as he saw them in the show. He sent an imaginative list of words describing images that was comprised of 24 items.

**Table 3.** Barry's Projection List

Dead Man Projections	this)
Glowing Paper Houses	Bright flashes of light
Falling paper to match speed of actual paper drop	Cell phone exploding
check the timing	Signs denoting cafes or the live projections you talked about
Body Parts x-ray images (and in suitcases)	Clouds
Umbrellas (top view morphing to people with umbrellas on phones in the rain) spinning	Universe
moving	Stars that spell out obusification
Phones of all types	Betsy, these are the ones for now. They are just ideas.
Parts of phones	Let me know if you have
Titles of all scenes as if texted	questions.
Text of all lines used in the audio of the cell phone	Barry
ballet	
Huge fire from grill (for Ms G to walk into)	Tumbling clothes
Ice Skaters (Holiday on Ice style with Hermia added)	
Some of Hopper's work	
Stained glass window	
Raw Meat/ cooked meat	
Lobsters	
A heart exploding	
Cosmopolitans floating	
Images for the SA airport	
A video of the fight that was filmed and then turned	
into an image file that runs out of	
focus and out of time with the stage action (ask about	

It quickly became clear that Barry was not at a point in his process where he could determine the specifics of when and how projections would be used in relation to the action of the play, and pressuring him to do so was counterproductive. I negotiated that we go through the list so he could tell me the projections that he saw as being absolutely necessary to the production. As he did this, we reached somewhat of an accord. He reminded me that he wanted to incorporate the use of texts for each scene, and I began designing the wording and function of these texts with renewed vigor.

In order to determine what the texts would accomplish as a scenic element, I went back to the script. Having learned the importance of a paper plot for the action in *Is He Dead?* I had created a paper plot for the play.

**Table 4. Page of Paper Plot**

<b>Dead Man's Cell Phone</b> Barry Bell, Director Betsy Muller, Scenic Designer Becky Lussier, Lighting Designer				
Part, Scene	Title	Action	Setting	Significant furniture/set dressings
I, i	Dead Man	Jean Meets (dead) Gordan	Café	chair with back to Audience, chair for Jean, one high table, one low table, two stools, bowls (2), spoons (2)
I, ii	Funeral	Remembering Gordan, Jean kneels to pray	Catholic Church (St. Thomas)	pulpit/podium
I, iii	Lipstick	The other woman and Jean meet	Café	same café, high table, two stools
I, iv	Gottlieb's House	Mrs. Gottlieb	Livingroom	Low table, two chairs
I, v	Gottlieb's House	"family" dinner, Jean leaves and re-enters the room--once by herself, and once with Dwight, Mrs. G and Hermia leave the room, Dwight brings popcorn from kitchen.	Gottlieb Dining Room	Five chairs (four people), dining room table, Roast, four plates, four forks, carving knife (salt shaker, cup, spoon: brought on by Jean)
I, vi	Love between the Sheets	Touch the paper, touch each other...	Stationary Store Closet	two tables on either sides, paper,

The script moved fluidly from space to space, almost as if it were written for film rather than theatre, so it was very important to be aware of what was needed for each scene. One of Barry's largest concern was also to keep action flowing from scene to scene, or as he put it "no scene changes". To help delineate between the twelve different scenes in the play, I had created a title for each scene that reflected the action in it in the paper plot. The impetus to have as little of a stop and start for each scene as possible, could be accomplished by using the projected texts for each scene.

One of my concerns in using the projector was that the audience would have to choose whether to look at the projections or the actions taking place on stage. In order to avoid this distraction, I had placed the projections directly behind the deck where the action would be taking place. With this placement, the use of texts on the projection screen would be able to



accomplish two tasks at once. First, it would cause the illusion that the plot line was still progressing while a scene change was happening: the texts would be used as transitioning tools. The stage would still go dark between scenes, but the ambient glow from the projector would light the deck just enough for the crew, while the texts were placed high enough above the change to intentionally distract the audience until the furniture was set. The second was putting the audience on even footing as far as their knowledge of texts was concerned. This concept came from my experience as an educator before I began my graduate education.

While teaching, I had used projectors to encourage active participation from my students and to pace my lesson plan. Often times I would introduce a vocabulary word on one slide, verbally discuss what the word meant, and then reveal the definition in a single phrase so that they could easily copy it into their notes and commit it to memory. I decided to use a similar approach for the texts: an acronym or symbol would appear in “text speak”, the projection would pause for a moment, giving the audience time to guess the meaning, or whisper it to the person sitting next to them, and then the definition would follow. By the time this dispersal of information had taken place, the scene was set and the next projection was able to fade into existence, backlighting the actors in their positions on stage as the rest of the lights came up on the scene .



**Figure 34.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Photograph of a Projection (during transition). *Note: The red glow below the lettering is the light of a cigarette that began the following scene.*

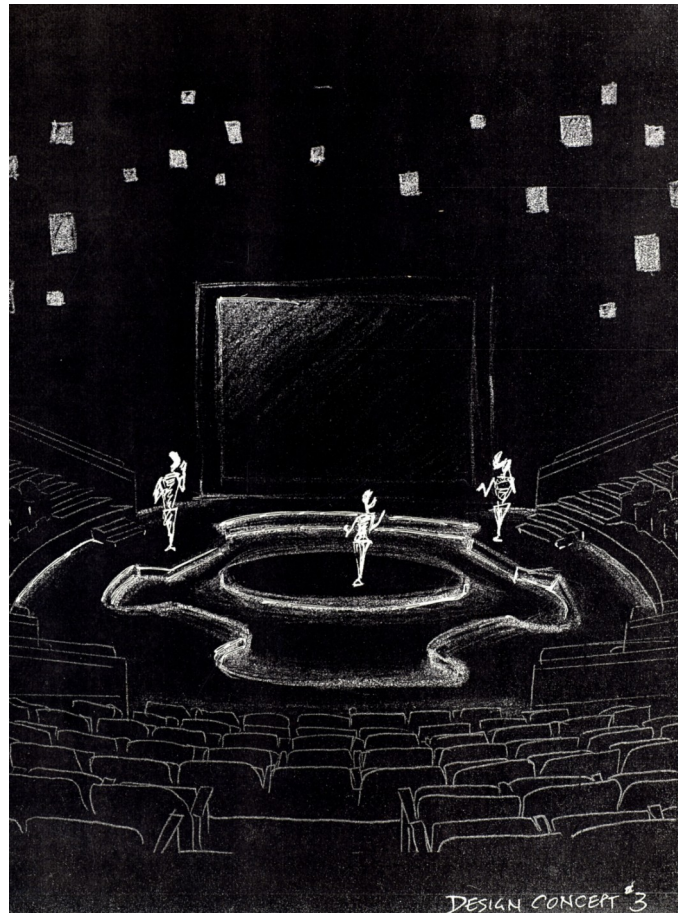
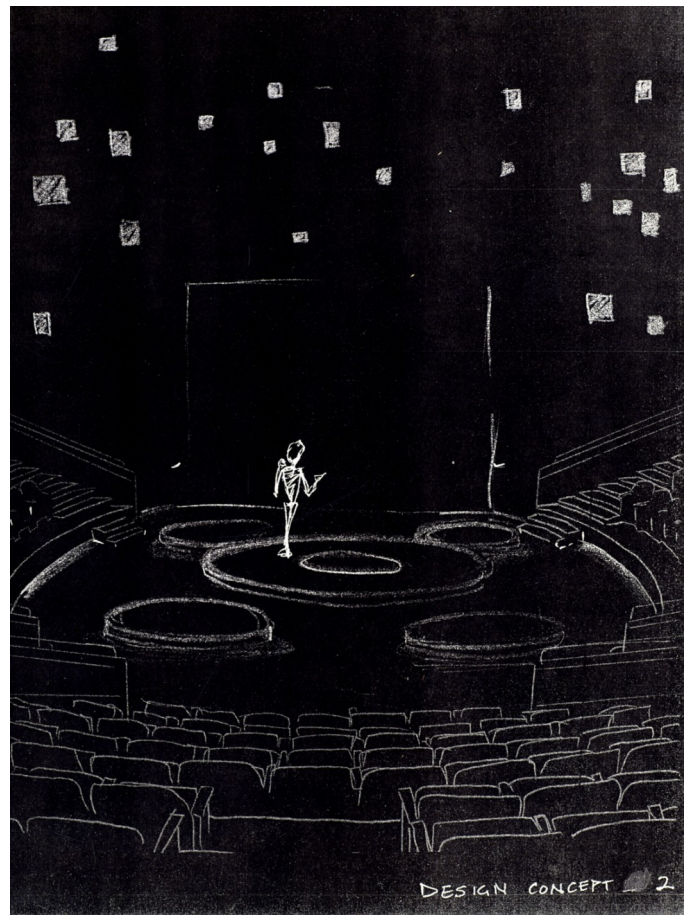
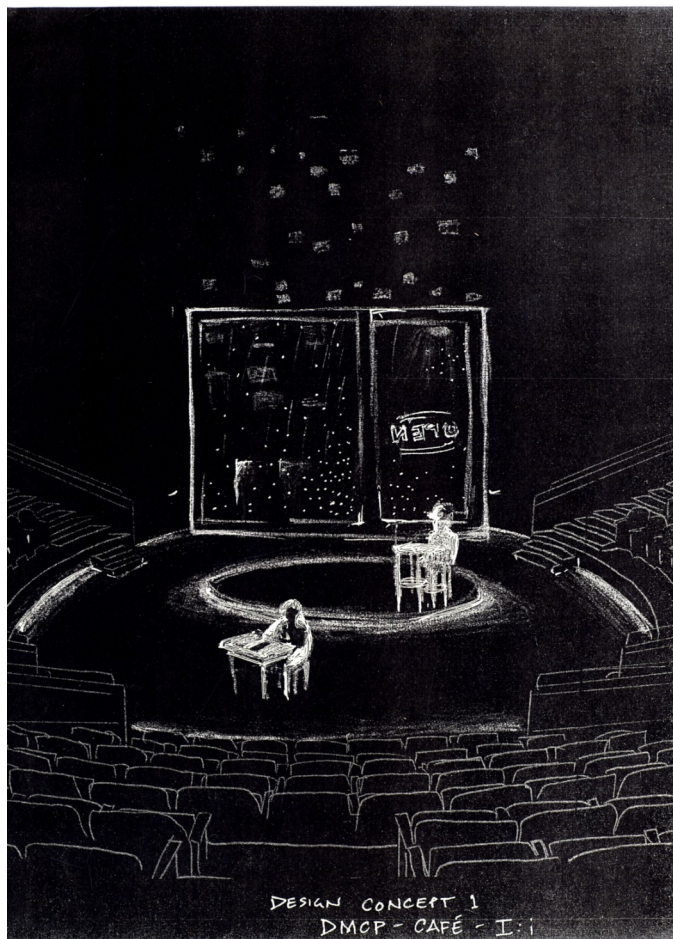
Alan “Al” Williamson, our new technical director, was invaluable in enabling the projections to be realized. He researched and purchased one of the computer programs Tennessee recommended, called Isadora. When I mentioned my efforts to contact the kinetic imaging department, Al did not think their assistance would be necessary, as he felt that the capabilities of the computer program would meet our needs. He also assigned an undergraduate lighting design major, Cody Richardson, who had an interest in projections, to educate himself in the use of the program. The plan was that I was to provide Cody with the images and a list of transitions and text that he would construct and save in the program, to be played during each production. Cody would also be the board operator for the projections during each production so he would be able to troubleshoot, should any problems occur.

Using the paper plot, the list Barry and I had settled on, and my chart of texts to use during transitions I created a new plot for the projections, and began researching images to use for each scene. A new list was formed including a description of text that would precede each

scene, and the image/images, that would appear throughout the scene. Cody and I met regularly, so I could discuss with him the timing and appearance of each transition. During these meetings, Cody and I also discussed the changes and critiques from Barry, and I would convey any new images I had created along with notes on how they could be inserted into the sequence. While these meetings were essential, one of the greatest assets of using Isadora as the operating system was that it had quick and simple editing capabilities, which could be used to accommodate Barry's direction during the rehearsals. The program alleviated the need for me to pressure Barry to make decisions about the timing and appearance of the projections too far in advance.

### **Darkness and Light**

I desired to use the projections in *Dead Man's Cell Phone* to extend the use of the theme of energy as it related to life and death to design the atmosphere of the space. My initial research was of cell phones themselves, and the sketches I first presented to Barry reflected the shapes of keys, using the projection screen as if it were the screen of a cellular device. His response was that two of the three sketches were too "islandy" and the remaining sketch, consisting of a singular circular platform placed just downstage of the platform did not have enough levels. Supposing that he had a configuration set in his mind that I could not see, I offered to let him sketch what he saw on the blank drawing of Hodges that I had brought with me. As I offered him the pen, he recoiled, and my advisor came to his aid. "You don't have to do that," Ron reassured Barry. In response I began sketching a series of tiers on the spot. "Less symmetrical," he immediately responded. Through this process I recognized that while Barry could describe what he wanted in words, it did not mean that he was comfortable expressing his ideas as a designer would. That was my role, providing and editing the picture.



**Figures 35-37.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Preliminary Design Concepts

While we had not discussed the action of the play extensively, I did know that the circular shape of Hodges, as well as its thrust seating, dictated the action of the play, as well as our desire for fluid transitions. I wanted to encourage this fluid motion in the action of the play as well. Drawing platforms that swept from upstage to downstage while following Hodges' space, I discovered the shape of a teardrop. Upon returning to my research on cell-phones I found this shape repeated in two buttons that appeared to be circling one another. As I drew the shape in the space it morphed from what I referred to as the "Pepsi shape" to that of a yin-yang symbol. The concept of the polar opposites of life and death coexisting simultaneously, trapped in a codependent relationship, fit perfectly with the psyche of the play. Barry had a very positive response to the shape, and as soon as he saw the white model he identified the principal uses of each of the acting areas on stage.

The quality of luminescence that encompassed nearly every feature of the cell phone was of particular interest to me as I researched. I found myself wanting to trace every feature of the play in light as well. The blue and white light that issued from cell phones also matched Barry's description of the world of the play as being very cold and technological. Embedded in the script, I also found pockets of warmth. Particularly in a scene between two of the main characters:

DWIGHT: These digital cameras—you know—and all the digital—stuff—the informational *bits*—flying through the air—no one wants to remember. People say I love you—on cell phones—and where does it go? No paper. Remembering requires paper.

JEAN: Yeah. But maybe the air remembers. Sometimes.

DWIGHT: I hope the air remembers.

(Ruhl, p 47 )



“Digital bits, flying through the air” sparked an idea of using lanterns above the acting space to represent these ephemeral entities, constantly in conversation with one another, suspended just out of our reach. Barry was very much in favor of these illuminations, and he and the lighting designer enjoyed finding places in the script when these lanterns could be used to highlight the juxtaposition between the cold blue light of the technological world and the warm glow of the conversational spirits that populated it. Beyond providing sketches, research, and support, I also created and presented a white model earlier in the design process than I had in the previous two shows. The special representation provided by the model made it easier for Barry to respond and make changes far before the build for the show had begun.

### **The Proverbial Foot**

My research images for the lanterns began with images of the floating lanterns that are released every year in an Asian spiritual tradition. My solution for a far less flammable, theatrical version of this concept was a single warm incandescent bulb housed in a rectangular Plexiglas lantern, faced with a diffusing contact paper. The lighting designer, Becky Lussier, wired up several bulbs in the small lanterns for one production meeting. One of her interpretations of the lanterns included a clustering of white Christmas lights to suggest the spirits of many conversations occurring within each vestibule. While I wished to be open and collaborate in the process, it was difficult for me to see the lanterns appearing with anything but a single source. Al, trying to strike an accord that would be agreeable to all involved, recommended that the electricians create a series of Christmas lights that sat in the configuration of an orb within the lamp—an organized and concentric cluster. Outnumbered, and frustrated, I agreed to the negotiation in the name of collaboration.

Between the luminous lanterns, glowing floor panels, and metallic circuitry in the floor treatment, I had tried to incorporate the presence of the glowing screen into the design. However, I had taken up Patti's mantra of creating a space different than that of her previous production. As I mentioned earlier, the large rectangular screen had recently graced the stage with its presence for *Tommy*, also directed by Barry, and in an effort to morph the space into something different, I sought out a new projection surface. The solution I was keenly in favor of using was large panels of nylon spandex that would run from grid to deck and hang in a curved pattern to echo the shape of the stage. Unfortunately, the spandex was not offered in a width that would accommodate the size of the projections and two seams would have to be made. Barry was not convinced of the quality of the spandex as a projection surface from the first time I suggested it, and when we finally obtained a sample, sewed a tiny seam, and hung it on a pipe, Barry was even less pleased with the results. Understandably so, as he was used seeing the flawless surface of the projection screen. Still, I was unwilling to completely give up this concept of using fabric as a solution that would certainly transform the space and transport the audience into a world they had never seen before.

Another point of contention came in the choice of furniture. At our second production meeting, I had presented the idea of using all aluminum furniture: the total stock of aluminum furniture would consist of two bar-height tables, two shorter tables, two bar chairs, and five lower cantina-styled chairs. Each of the tables would contain a small shelf directly underneath where the actor's properties could be pre-set to cut down on the transition time between scenes. I showed Barry an example of the type of table, and as his response was so affirmative, I did not think to send him images or a breakdown of how each piece would be used before the rehearsal process began.

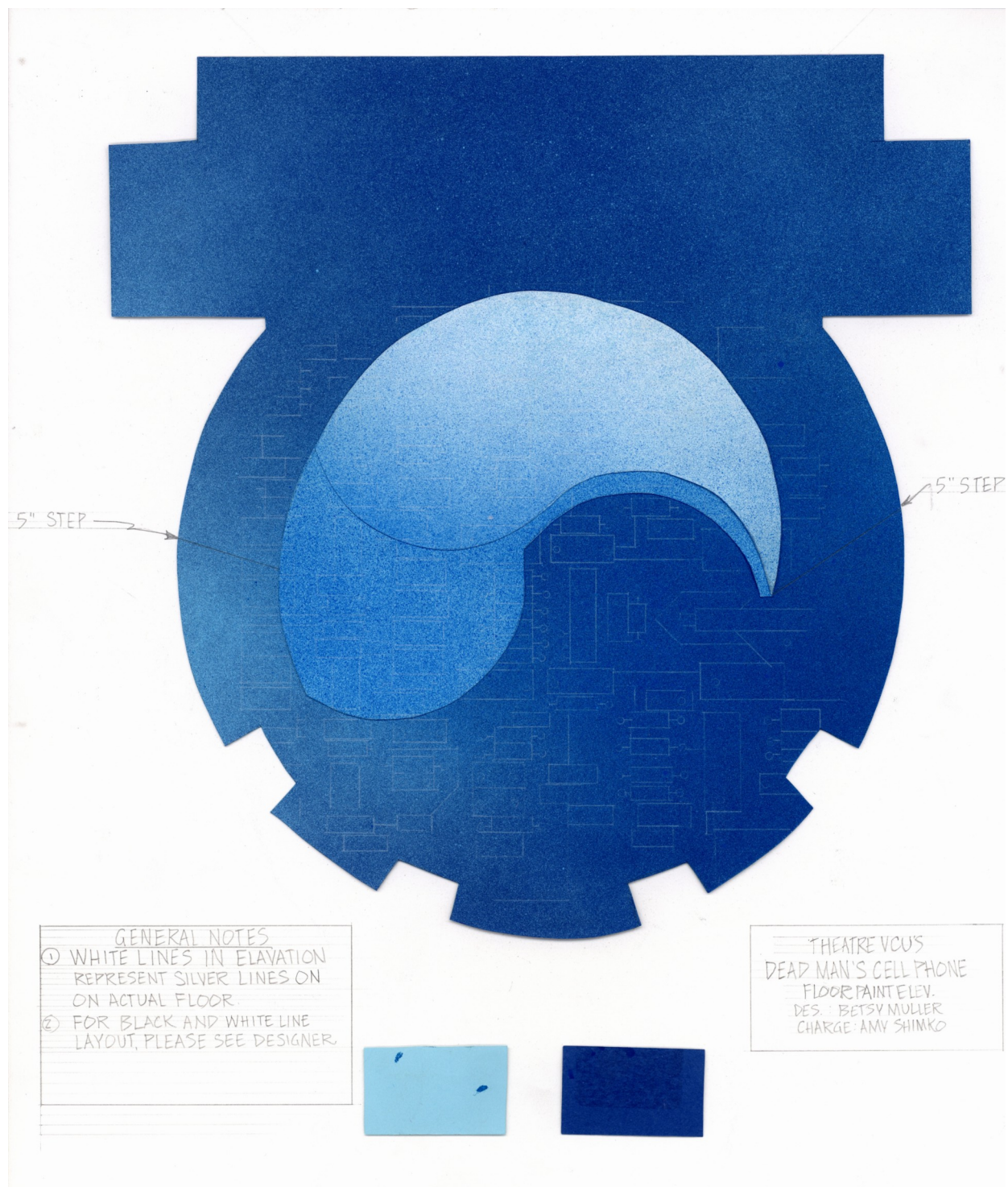
If I had another opportunity to recommend this prescription of furniture, I would be

sure to have it present and ready for rehearsal well beforehand. Barry had not had an opportunity to imagine the action that incorporated this transient form of furniture. Without these pieces in place, Barry began to imagine his own concept of the furniture. Occupied with projections, my search for furniture was underway until I began receiving rehearsal reports requesting upholstered chairs and an eight foot dinning room table. At the time, I was baffled at how far from the original concept of furniture these requests were. I was advised to stay true to my design concept, and so I planted my feet firmly and waited for the tidal wave to pass.

## **Resolve**

The resolution to the appearance of the lanterns, the type of projection surface, and the style of furniture were unraveled with a heavy dose of humble truth and honesty. The truth of the matter with the lanterns was the most quickly apparent. The Christmas lights, rewired and taped into a spherical configuration, were being hung inside their rectangular housing when someone in the theater noticed that one of the fixtures was smoldering. They were quickly replaced with single source globes, not with my own doing, but because the wiring on the Christmas lights was not able to handle the voltage. In retrospect, I should not have let the process get to this point. If I felt strongly about my vision concerning the simplicity of the lanterns, I should have stapled it down firmly from the beginning of the process, and been clear about my intent with the production team. In future productions I would have to keep in mind that certain elements of design were worth defending and keeping safe.

After much debate on the issue of screen versus spandex, Al took me aside and explained that spandex would not be the best surface for projection because its transparent quality would reveal everything upstage of it, including the projection housing, a point that Lou Szari, the lighting instructor had also explained to me. He offered other options of fabric that were slightly more opaque and came in larger widths to eliminate the unsightly seams that Barry



**Figure 38.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Floor Elevation

had not liked. I had to admit at that point that the setbacks of the spandex were outweighing its initial appeal. In the end, we used a combination of ocean-blue velour and the screen—its edges having been knocked back from their usual bold black vinyl, by a covering of the same ocean-blue velour. I resigned myself to saving the idea of a translucent fabric as a backdrop for another production. Despite my willfulness in staying true to my design concept, as soon as Barry had suggested the upholstered items my mind had raced to a recent version of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* that I had worked on, that featured chairs upholstered in specially ordered silver and blue damask. I recognized that this treatment was an example of a design where the furniture the luxurious appearance Barry desired, while staying true to the metallic nature of the original design.

I also knew if I were to make this one accommodation, that the rest of the furniture would need to follow this concept, and with the dates of technical rehearsals looming so near, it was difficult to imagine re-planning all of the furniture in the show. The fact of the matter was, despite having been given an undergraduate student who was to be assigned to the aluminum furniture, we had not gotten our hands on any of those pieces either. I reconciled myself to the use of furniture pulled from VCU's stock, as long as it could be painted with an aluminum finish and reupholstered with the "glacial damask" fabric I had brought Barry a swatch of from a nearby fabric store. And with this, we reached an accord.

These points of contention were extremely uncomfortable for me, but I learned an important lesson: Being a designer did not mean that I had to abandon my intuition the moment it was questioned by a director. However, in some instances between a director and designer, verbal assertions became nothing more than a ruffling of feathers and a puffing of egos that left both exhausted and dissatisfied. During one particularly heated discussion Al mediated, "Let's



go away and think about this, and then we'll talk more another day.” It was a simple solution, but it diffused the situation. It helped me keep in mind for the future that there were some discussions best continued another day.

The objective of providing options through visuals held me in good stead and also became the underpinning of the production's demands of filling the role of projections designer. Many of the pieces of visual research were eventually edited and used as slides. It taught me not to be afraid of admitting when I was not comfortable with a particular medium and asking for the assistance and patience of my fellow collaborators on the production team. When it came to parts of the process like implementing projections and editing photographs, with which I also had very little experience, sometimes the best course of action was to seek initial help and grapple with the new medium until an acceptable level of proficiency was achieved.

During the process of *Is He Dead?* John and I had taken a very logistical approach to the design process. The consistency with which we met one another had lead to a mutual trust and understanding. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* taught me to find flexibility in my personal objective, that sometimes I had to look up from my papers to recognize that the director was cringing at the thought of drawing, that I had to consider the tone of his voice when I was demanding that he make choices. I learned that a collaborative team involves me and the director: two individuals who respond to pressure differently. It made me aware that there are times in a production process when no manner of logistics can dislodge the stronghold of a defensive mindset, and that agreements made on account of frustration are never really agreements at all. This production process was crucial because it taught me to recognize when emotions were becoming constraints, and respect that point in my collaborators by letting us both have room to breathe.



**Figure 39,** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Preshow Cue



**Figure 40.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Jean and Dwight in the Stationary Store



**Figure 41.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Jean Praying at Church





**Figure 42.** *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, The Bar Scene

*Legacy of Light*

“It needs to be magical.”

-Bruce Miller

**Preparation**

The first time I read *Legacy of Light*, I cried. I fell in love with everything about it: the characters, the humor, the powerful message that our love holds the energy to transcend time and space, spoke straight to the core of my being. It was difficult to see a specific setting while I read the script the first time; similarly to *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, the bits of scenic elements I saw were cinematic in their ability to jump from one location to the next. I did see each of the characters clearly, and I felt and saw the energy that dwelt in an ethereal realm of the mind's eye. In other words, the more abstract and metaphysical qualities felt much clearer than the concrete and physical elements as they would be manifested on stage.

The production assignment was in collaboration with Barksdale Theater, so I was familiar with the physical confines of the space. Unlike *Is He Dead?*, which had one plot line and two settings, *Legacy of Light* had two plot lines and suggested a multitude of settings. One plot line occurred in modern day in New Jersey and the other in eighteenth century France. The former involved an astrophysicist named Olivia who decided she wanted to have a baby, despite her cervical cancer, through a 22 year-old surrogate mother, Millie. The latter was about a scientist named Emilie du Chatalet, Voltaire's lover, who found herself pregnant by way of another lover, and almost certain she would die in childbirth. A fluid transition between such different time periods and places would be a challenge in the low-ceilinged, three-quarter thrust space; while the plotline had the flow of a musical, there was no fly-space to hide scenery in, and there was no fourth wall, or third, or second...only half of a wing wall to suggest where the seating stopped and the upstage began.

**Table 5.** *Legacy of Light*, Page of Paper Plot

# Legacy of Light

by Karen Zacarias

Scene Breakdown 10/25/10

Presented By: Barksdale Theatre Director: Bruce Miller Scenic Designer: Betsy Muller			Act; Scene (scene title)		Action	Location
<b>I;i</b>	"A love scene...on a bed, under and over the covers"		EMILE and ST. LAMBERT in bed → VOLTAIRE <u>enters</u> , interrupting → VOLTAIRE and LAMBERT swordplay. EMILE breaks it up. LAMBERT <u>exits</u> → EMILE and VOLTAIRE quarrel and mutually pardon			Boudoir
<b>I;ii</b>	"If a galaxy can have a baby, why can't we?"		PETER <u>enters</u> OLIVIA already onstage			Family Room
<b>I;iii</b>	"Voltaire and Emile Vaudville Scene"		VOLTAIRE and EMILE exposition "We are dead and gone"			Stage
<b>I;iv</b>	Choose Me		PETER and OLIVIA meet MILLIE "So interview all the preferred fertile women you want. And then: choose me."			Living Room
<b>I;v</b>	Expecting		EMILE and LAMBERT walk in the gardens → PAULINE and VOLTAIRE <u>enter</u> → EMILE <u>exits</u> to throw up, PAULINE <u>exits</u> OLIVIA addresses the board of directors (image of newly born planet)			Gardens
<b>I;vi</b>	Vega B		MILLIE pins LEWIS' pants while she tells him what she's done			Conference Room
<b>I;vii</b>	Lewis' Three Rules of the Universe		VOLTAIRE discovers EMILIE is pregnant			Millie's House
<b>I;viii</b>	Much To Be Done		PETER and MILLIE look at sonogram → OLIVIA <u>enters</u> late "Oh yes. Right. Mine. Thanks. The picture of the baby...my baby"			Study
<b>I;ix</b>	Baby's First Picture		VOLTAIRE monologues and eats apple. → MONS CHATALET <u>enters</u> → Both <u>exit</u>			Doctor's Office
<b>I;x</b>	"Everything is Cause and Effect"		EMILE and PAULINE discuss → CHATALET <u>enters</u> , presenting beautiful cloth → VOLTAIRE <u>enters</u> and supports PAULINE's argument → CHATALET <u>exits</u> EMILE exits → OLIVIA <u>enters</u> , reading. Finds two star and sonogram in book			Gardens
<b>I;xi</b>	Two Worlds Begin to Meet		EMILIE monologues about <i>light</i> and <i>love</i> *a <i>rainbow</i> appears			Patio
<b>I;x</b>	Where the Head Meets the Heart		OLIVIA presents findings to a Girl Scout Troup, also explaining the contribution Emile made to science.			Garden
<b>II; i</b>	Where the Two Plots Meet		MILLIE and LEWIS argue over the house. (she to let it go, he to keep it) "Do you know what happens to people that have no roots? They float off into space and disappear."			Troup Headquarters
<b>II; ii</b>	What's Holding Us Back?		EMILE works → VOLTAIRE <u>enters</u> , arguing: is work our legacy? "No! There is nature, there is chance, and there is science. And the reason so many woman die in childbirth is because we let them die."			Millie's House
<b>II; iii</b>	"Assault of Sustained Thinking"					Study



To prepare for the first meeting with director, Bruce Miller, I created a paper plot of the scenes and discovered that a majority of the scenes could be played as if they took place in an outside setting. The two plot lines meet when Olivia, mistrusting of her own maternal instincts and capacity raise a child, runs out into the rain, and climbs a tree, where she finds Voltaire roosted in its branches. The presence of the tree and its apples, were important throughout the play: the apple related to Newton's discoveries as a guiding light to Voltaire and Emilie's scientific work as well as Olivia's inability to have children. The tree related to the Chatalet's genealogy and as Millie's desire to shelter her brother by maintaining the home left to them by their parents. I kept my initial responses tucked in the back of my mind as I went into the meeting, in November of 2010. In response to the lessons I had learned in *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, I decided to keep my mind as open as possible, and allow the meeting to help clarify my objectives for the production.

### **The First Meeting**

Trees, however, were about as far away from our initial conversation as possible. As the artistic director of Theatre IV, Bruce's opening statements described the importance of *Legacy of Light* in the 2010-2011 theatrical season. It was the theatre's contribution of the annual Act's of Faith Festival in Richmond, for which Second Presbyterian church was the convening sponsor. It was also one of Theatre IV's productions celebrating Latino Heritage, which had begun with *Boleros for the Disenchanted* the previous season. He explained that Karen Zacharias was of Latin-American descent and he wanted to acknowledge that in the production.

"Are you of Latin-American descent?" he asked me. I explained that technically I was a quarter Latina, but my upbringing had not reflected this heritage. I went on to explain that most

of my knowledge of Latin-American culture had been informed by living in Tucson, Arizona for six years, studying the works of Barclay Goldsmith's *Borderland's Theatre*, and reading and attending plays by Latin-American playwrights. I offered to contribute any knowledge I had attained from being immersed in this unique southwestern culture to the production.

The meeting continued, in a similar fashion to be one that discussed ideas rather than specifics on the production. Bruce explained that the play was about “two powerful forces coming together” where the result was birth. This convergence took place in an energy field that had an element of magic. He saw the transitions as being free flowing with no blackouts. “The constant is change” he said, “so the change of scenes should fit into that world”. As far as perimeters were concerned, he wanted to break the fourth wall completely. There was to be a sense of grandeur in the eighteenth century scenes, along with the sense that “they’re at court”. The contemporary scenes were to have a noticeable lack of frill in comparison.

### **Latin American Influence**

After this first meeting it was clear that in order to think like the director on this production, incorporating everything from the topics of magical colliding forces, and the Latin American culture to everyday living and French Aristocracy demanded that I deduce where it was that all of these worlds intersected before I designed the set. I began with a concept that was clearly important to Bruce: that of celebrating the Latin-American heritage of the playwright. I boiled my interpretation of Latin American theatre to a single concept—theatre magic could be experienced through simple solutions. This conclusion was deduced from the fact that Mexican American theatre had first been performed in the most rudimentary circumstances, for example, the truck bed of a migrant worker could be a stage (Peck). The power of magic was not in the spectacle, but in the power of the story. In an interview with the

founder of Borderlands Theatre, Barclay Goldsmith seven years earlier, I had asked him to respond to a quote by Jorge Huerta that read, “We keep searching for the magic that comes when we can feel everyone around us in equal pleasure.” Barclay had responded that, “celebratory theatre is the most invigorating and exciting” (p. 47) and further explained that it was at these performances of celebration where he saw “magic” occurring the most. It was with this trust in the actors and the audience that I approached the solutions to the depth and fluidity of the production.

In my search for inspirational work of Latin-Americans, I was also reminded of one of my favorite Latino activists, Augusto Boal. Boal’s theories on the importance of theatre in society were based on symbols, the Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed and the Rainbow of Desires. I found another of Boal’s works entitled, “Aesthetics of the Oppressed”.

Unexpectedly, I found that the piece had direct correlations to my project as he explained how individuals create “simple semblances” for “complex realities”. He went on to describe:

“When a baby opens its eyes for the first time, it looks at everything its eyes alight on, and, looking at everything, sees nothing, only the color grey. Little by little, as its optic nerve begins to be stimulated by light and shade, it organizes its visual perception, distinguishing straight lines and curves, depths and colours.” (11)

Unaware of how greatly this statement would be reflected in my design, I highlighted it to share with the director at the next production meeting.

While these concepts were inspiring I felt no closer to grasping the physical characteristics of the world I was creating. I turned to art as a window to the culture as I had in *Ain’t Misbehavin’*. I found a fantastic resource in the book *Triumph of our Communities: Four Decades of Mexican American Art*. I fell in love with the vibrancy of the colors, the use of

symbols, and powerful composition. When Ron recommended that I begin creating my own art work in response to my research, these pieces directed the aesthetic choices I made. Along with Boal's quote, the paintings would also be brought to the next meeting with me to see which Bruce felt they represented the forces at work in this play.



**Figure 43.** Alfredo Arreguin, *Kikitat*, Collection Karen Van Hooft.



**Figure 44.** Painting #1. My first attempt to paint a piece reflecting the motifs and themes of the play. As Bruce had described in our meeting, two forces are about to collide. The cosmos (and the canvas) appear to be bursting at the seams with light, wind, and life in anticipation of this great collision. The scene is witnessed through the eye of a telescope. While the piece had energy, I felt it was too literal, and wanted to explore the scene that would take place at the moment of the collision itself.





**Figure 45.** Painting #2. I saw the moment of collisions as a dazzling burst of light. While I felt this painting expressed the ethereal qualities of light and energy, I felt it lacked the vibrancy and movement of Painting #1. I also wanted the painting to tell a story.





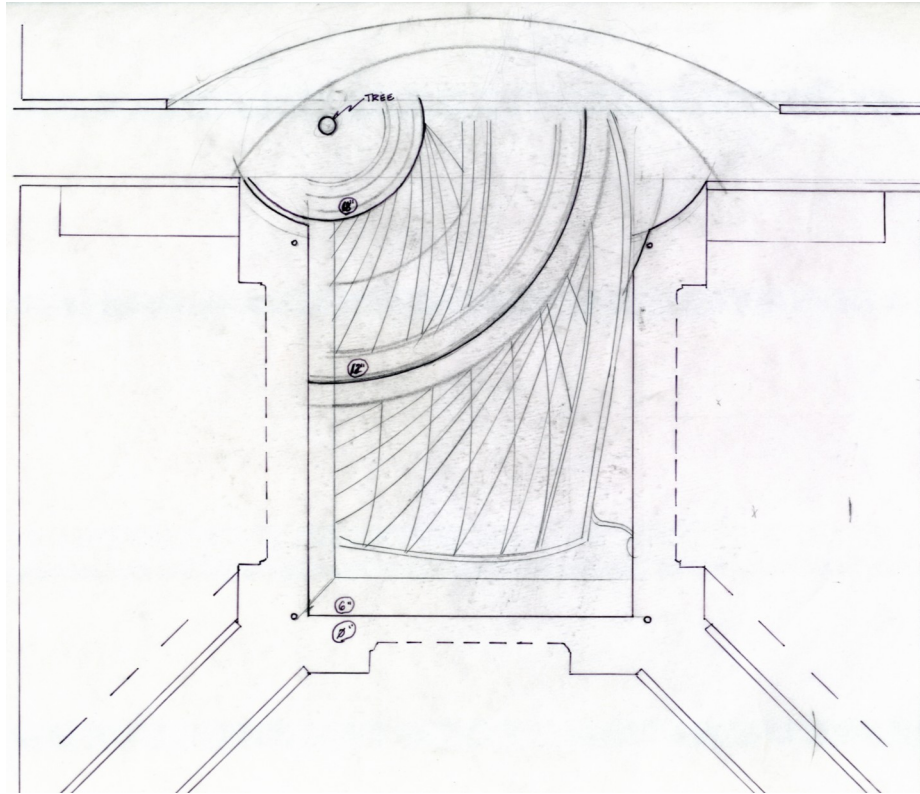
**Figure 46.** Painting #3. I enjoyed the sense of gaiety and liveliness expressed in this painting. In it, I represented the playful nature of the script and the meeting of science and orderliness with emotion in its spontaneity. It was from this painting that the final floor sample was taken.

## The Second Meeting

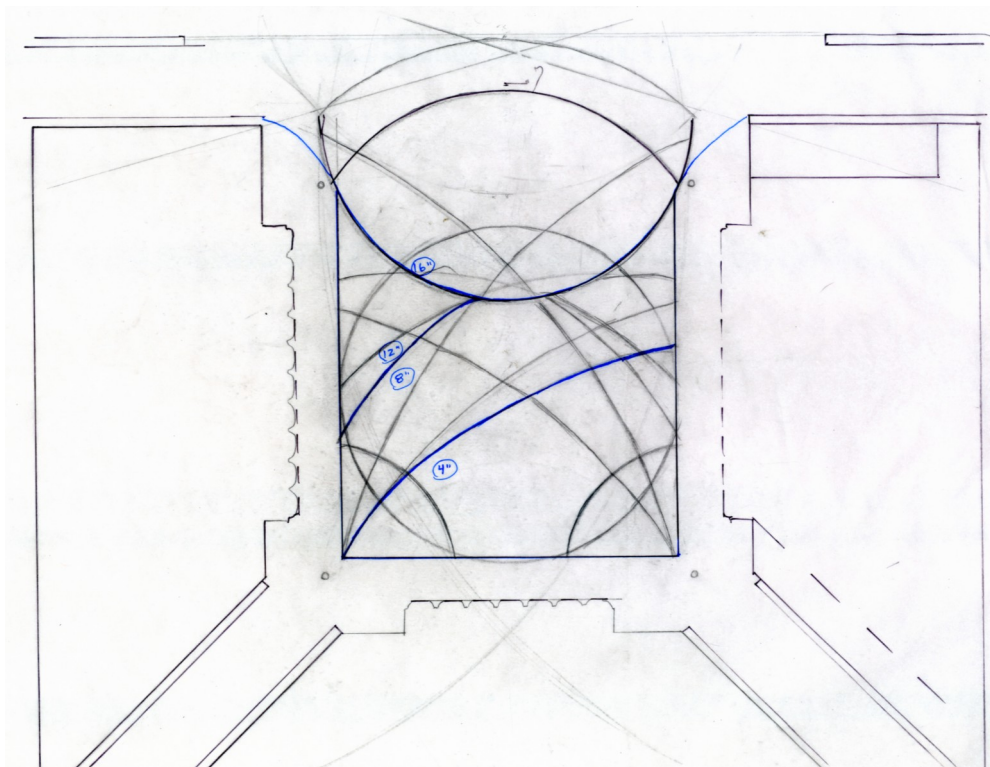
In addition, I had begun to research the style of grand rooms and gardens from the eighteenth century. I also researched astronomical devices used during that time period and prior to it. The beautifully crafted instruments were an example of the point at which art and science existed in an elegant and useful solution. The astrolabes held interest as they came in many shapes and styles; the mariner's astrolabe was of particular interest to me. An image placed on a Barksdale ground plan created a series of arcs which if made into different levels, would cascade from upstage to downstage. I traced the shape of the levels in the space to show Bruce. To avoid the pitfalls I had recognized creating the sightlines for *Is He Dead*, I created a quick exercise where I used a compass to draw arcs from each of these extreme sightlines in the space. In this way I familiarize myself with the perspectives from which the audience members would be viewing the show.



**Figure 47.** Horary Quadrant.



**Figure 48.** *Legacy of Light*, Preliminary Design based on the Astrolabe



**Figure 49.** *Legacy of Light*, Preliminary Design based on Arc Exercise



Quotes, paintings, and rough drafts in hand, I headed into my second meeting, at which the costume designer, Theresa Busch and her advisor, Toni-Leslie James, would also be present. Bruce responded well to the research I presented in printed-out PowerPoint slides, and the paintings. By showing Bruce a series of paintings, he was able to see how I had processed the play to the point of abstraction. He was not phased by my line of thinking as I had illustrated how the concepts of the play had taken a journey from the physical to metaphysical. However, as I concluded my presentation, Toni voiced the expression Bruce wore as she asked what it all meant.

At that point, I presented the rough ground plan and explained that I hoped to use colors from my paintings to inform the set's color palette. Bruce looked at the mariner's astrolabe inspired levels, but had a much stronger response to the random arcs I had drawn in relation to the sightlines. He found it much more interesting and encouraged me to further create a ground plan based on these lines. The paintings were excellent to have in the presence of the costume designer who pointed out some of the colors in the palette I had indicated were far too bright. Bruce clarified that "if it was between the set and the costumes, the costumes should be the star". We then agreed and indicated an area of the painting that reflected a more muted pallet.

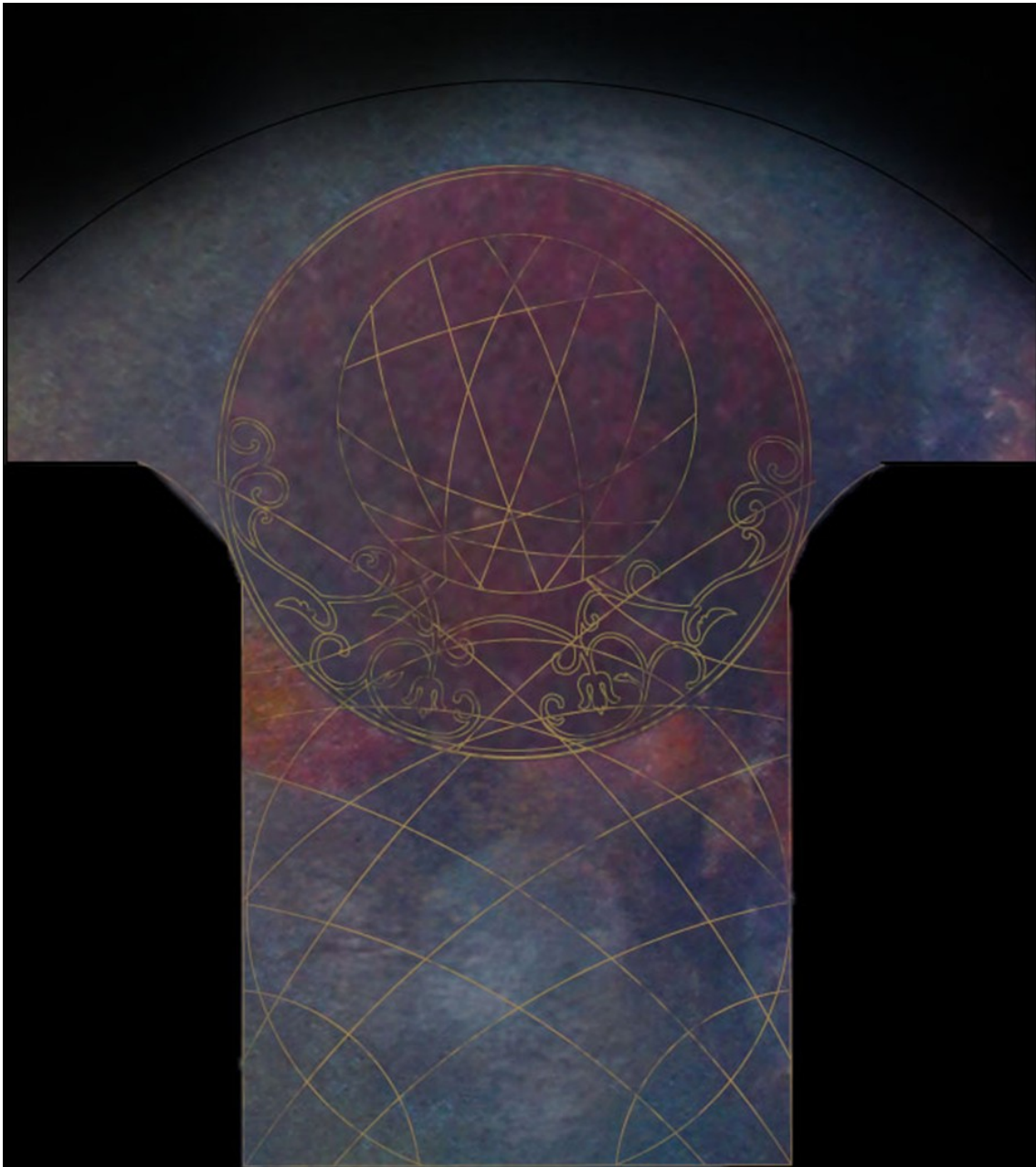
While Bruce had responded to the preliminary ground plans I had showed him, I noticed that he had not asked for a copy to consider while he was blocking, nor did the flat drawing seem to spark his imagination as far as how the actors would interact with the space. Just as with *Dead Man's Cell Phone* it was crucial that I represent the set as it would appear in the theater as early in the process as possible. In building this white model, I tried a new technique. Rather than create an immoveable representations of how the platforms would sit, the platforms were made up of multiple pieces of illustration board that could be re-configured on the spot. I

found that this concept of an easily adaptable model lent more flexibility to the collaboration. It not only helped me feel free to make changes, but allowed me to show Ron several different configurations prior to my meeting with Bruce.

## **The Results**

Since it was the first time Bruce was meeting with Theresa, he reiterated some of the concepts he saw as being prevalent in the show. He described the two plot lines as having parallel universes. It was this concept that helped me deduce the appearance of the upstage area and the use of the tree. The tree would split the upper deck in half as if it were the division between two parallel universes. From it would cascade levels that were created based on the “sightline arcs”. The floor treatment would reflect the qualities of the painting we had decided upon, with an overlay of the intersecting lines outlined in gold. It also embodied Boal’s description of the “curved” lines and “depth of colours” a baby sees as its eyes adjust to appreciate the world around it.

In order to capture the elegance of the eighteenth century plot line, I created a floral wreath that mimicked the circular astrolabes from my research. I also integrated this design on the facings of the bed which rose out of the stage floor by way of a crank operated from backstage. Above the bed there was a canopy attached by quick-release clips so that the actors had only to tug on it and they could carry it offstage as the bed slowly disappeared into the stage floor. The canopy was made of a translucent, silver, dye cut, floral fabric, the same fabric I had chosen to indicate the foliage of the tree upstage.



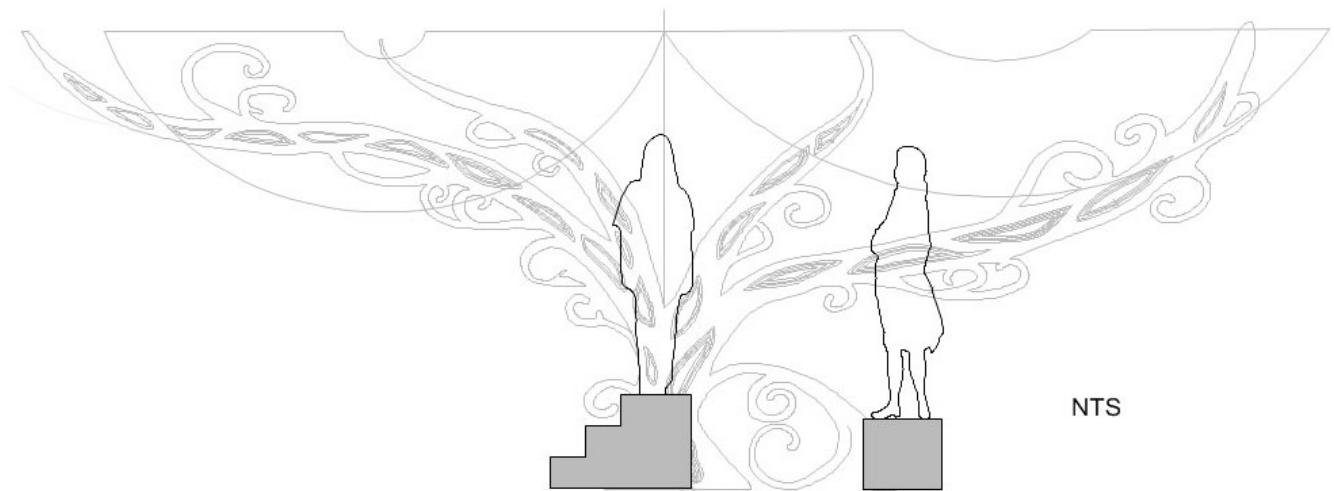
**Figure 50.** *Legacy of Light*, Final Floor Elevation



**Figure 51.** (right) Rosebrand's Celestia Flora Fabric. The lavender is additional backing fabric which was not used in the final design.



**Figure 52.** *Legacy of Light*, Act I, Scene i, including the bed that rose from the stage floor.



**Figure 53.** *Legacy of Light*, Glow Step Plate Excerpt



**Figure 54.** *Legacy of Light*, Glow Step in Use

As I showed Bruce the stylized design for the tree, he consistently told me that he wanted it to look organic. He was also very desirous that it look like an apple tree. The truss-styled tree I began with morphed into a winding, curling shape that reflected both the shape of an apple tree and the eighteenth century wreath on the floor . When I suggested a metallic gold as its paint treatment he cringed. “I want it to be a friendly tree, rather than a technological tree” he responded. To help soften it I planned to use a yellow ochre velour toned down with sponging of the floor colors. The gold would only be hinted at by glints of paint in the branches. The silvery foliage was only metallic enough for the light to play across it at times. Backlit, it threw a beautiful platform across the stage floor. Its translucency allowed it to echo the passage of time by the lights played through it. Above its branches hung simple red globe incandescent light bulbs, representing both the luminescence of knowledge and the promise held by the fruits of humanity’s labor.

Holding true to the simplicity inspired by the Latin American theatre research, other technical solutions were equally as simple as the disappearing bed. Bruce requested that there be projections during several scenes, so a screen was operated by pulley to track on and off stage. The scene that involved Olivia and Voltaire meeting in a tree was accomplished by the actors stepping on two step units, illuminated to represent the enlightenment they were experiencing in the tree. Placed in front of the tree, the step units made the actors appear as though they were up in the tree simply by making their heads appear level with the branches. The flow of the scene changes was enabled by the fact that the set included built-in seating elements. For the contemporary scenes, the actors were able to use simple aluminum stools.

In order to help avoid a furniture conundrum and over-complication, beyond these stools I tried to avoid the use of separate furniture altogether. I did not want this lack of furniture to encumber the actors by eliminating the option of sitting down altogether, so I built seating units into the set. In early renderings, these units appeared as wedges that rose out of the deck floor. As with the idea of the metallic tree, Bruce commented that the units looked sharp and unfriendly. I had to agree that their sharp edges did not fit the style of the rest of the set. To accomplish a “friendlier” and more coherent appearance, I rounded the edges of the shapes, and continued the gold lines from the floor in a three-dimensional woven pattern. I looked to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts beautiful collection of Art Nouveau furniture to inspire the elegant flow of these structures to create an organic nature to match the upstage tree. The seating units were also built to house small lighting instruments for the lighting designer, Lynn Hartman to create an up-light on actors standing upstage of the units.

The built-in seating units were not the only features that housed lights. I also decided the floor should be embedded with small lights appearing invisible when the house lights were up, but shining like a blanket of stars when they were illuminated. These “stars” also appeared on the facing of the seating units, and in the curved cyclorama upstage, designed to look like an encompassing night sky. When the stage lights were low and the “stars” were shining, they had the effect I desired: the actors were in a starfield, their story was literally being set in the stars, and the audience could experience the magic of their story unfolding before their eyes.





**Figure 55.** *Legacy of Light, Act II*



**Figure 55.** *Legacy of Light, Curtain Call*



## Post-shows Process Evaluation

Whether the audience realized it or not, their response to the production was in direct correlation with the collaboration that had formed it. Towards the end of the production process of *Ain't Misbehavin'* the cast surprised me with their delight when the dancer proscenium, the last piece of the set, was placed on stage. Patti and the cast's heartfelt gratitude was apparent as they thanked the shop and repeatedly for all of the work we had done to put up the production. A review in the *Richmond Times Dispatch* stated that *Is He Dead?* was "directed by John Moon for maximum comedic effect," and went on to say that his direction, "pulls out all the stops". I was glad to see and hear that I had helped John utilize the acting space to its fullest capacity. The feedback regarding *Dead Man's Cell Phone* seldom mentioned the set in conjunction with the action on stage, and I was slightly disappointed when my most often received feedback was, "Can I have one of the lanterns?" The reviews for *Legacy of Light* were glowing and reflected the delicate balance I strove for in creating a relationship with the director that was informative, but not exhaustive, and a design that reflected a concept as well as practicality. Liz Hewitt, of Richmond.com proclaimed of the production, "It is a testament to Zacharias and to the work of all involved with the current production at Barksdale Theatre that it absolutely does [work]. It works and it sings" –a thrilling complement to me as a young designer striving to find my own unique voice in the field.

In each of these instances I found several tools to be useful in building a collaborative relationship with the director. Preparation needed to be organized as a tracking tool for the process, to make sure the unfolding of the story was at the heart of the process. An openness when listening to the director's visions and ideas for the plays helped guide the research and exploration that would come next. After this explorative stage, the images and ideas for aesthetics

where tempered by the practical needs of the director and actors in creating a space that inspired not only imagination, but action.

Preparation was imperative: navigating the script inside and out. Spread sheets were fundamental tools in this preparation, providing a quick reference and an analytical view of the overarching plot, themes, and technical needs of the play. These charts were never set in stone, but created an underlying structure for exploration to take place. Most importantly, this step allowed me to engage in a discussion between the script and myself before I engaged in a conversation with the director.

Guided by the directors' needs and desires, the most successful exploration processes included much more than photographs. These researched images were a good start, but to truly make discoveries, I listened to music, read poetry, watched videos, took trips to fabric stores, painted, sketched—whatever I could do to feel that I was able to fully embrace the world of the play. Like a traveler learning to speak in a new country, I had to study and listen a great deal before I attempted to speak the native language of the world of the play or tried to create my own scenic elements.

My research was most fruitful when I allowed my study of characters in the script to inform the decisions I was making, be it a jovial piano player in a club, a dour artist in a pink dress, a lethargic couple in a paper closet, or a frightened mother-to-be in a tree. Referring to the script and the spread sheet I had created helped keep the decisions I was making in check. It was important that I ask myself constantly, “How does this serve the action of the play?” And if there was no answer, it was placed aside until its purpose became apparent or needless and obsolete.

This would sound like a pretty self contained process, to be packaged and tied

up with a bow for the audience to enjoy, but that was seldom the case. There were always elements that were out of my control, and where my experience required flexibility. The key to succeeding in any collaboration was my dedication to foster a relationship that was conducive to creativity. It was important with each director, to find an approach that spoke clearly to him or her, whether it was a simple ground plan, or a rich painting. Collaboration did not mean that we agreed on everything, it was not a tidy relationship on an island of conclusions, but a pursuit of creating a uniquely tailored form of communication that suited the production and enabled the actors to tell the story.



**Figure 57.** *Legacy of Light*, Starfield

From *Ain't Misbehavin'* to *Legacy of Light* I discovered a plethora of strategies to make my communication with the director more interactive. Meeting with in person afforded the invaluable opportunity of looking at the space together. Directors like Patti were able to actually stand on what she wanted to be the edge of the stage, and directors like John Moon could outline the perimeter of the acting space. Beginning with *Dead Man's Cell Phone* I learned that supplying the director with a rough white model before the elevations were completed was beneficial so that we could discuss spacing issues and lessen the editing time of drafts later. Better yet were white models that were easily manipulated to re-work, allowing new discoveries to be made on the spot, as I discovered with Bruce in *Legacy of Light*.

Presenting my research in a form that matched the style of the show was crucial as well: the stylized art work from the Harlem Renaissance of couples dancing not only inspired me, but captured Patti's imagination as a choreographer and engaged her in the design conversation; photographs of furniture in flow charts appealed to John's logistical and aesthetic way of planning and envisioning the production; a projected presentation of bold images helped Barry see that I was embracing the medium he had requested and helped me start the process of finding ways to assist him in telling the story through projections; creating my own paintings as an initial response helped Bruce have a world to respond to that was equally as existential as the production on which we were working. In short, I learned to take time to become so in tune with the production and the director that I could find a method of relaying ideas for the scenic design that were conducive to collaborative discoveries to actively unfold the story on stage.

I will continually find ways to engage directors in the scenic design process in as many ways as I can conceive. For instance, I have begun to learn how to utilize computer rendering programs to create clearer renderings, such as this early one for *Legacy of Light*:





**Figure 58.** *Legacy of Light*, Design Rendering

I will continue to discover the world of computer animation with the intention of developing 3-D walk-through tours of the space for the director. I feel that this capability would allow the director, and potentially the actors, to get an even clearer feel for the movement within the space. Including, but not constricted to, the world of technology I will continually explore methods of expression that speak directly to my collaborators' artistic and logistical sensibilities through everything from sculpture to architecture. Learning how to express myself in as many different ways as possible will enable me to communicate in ways that transcend the spoken and written word, laying the foundation for truly unique productions, and paving the way for open and honest collaboration. Most importantly, as I travel forward in my career I will remember: the only voice that is worthless is the one that is never used.

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